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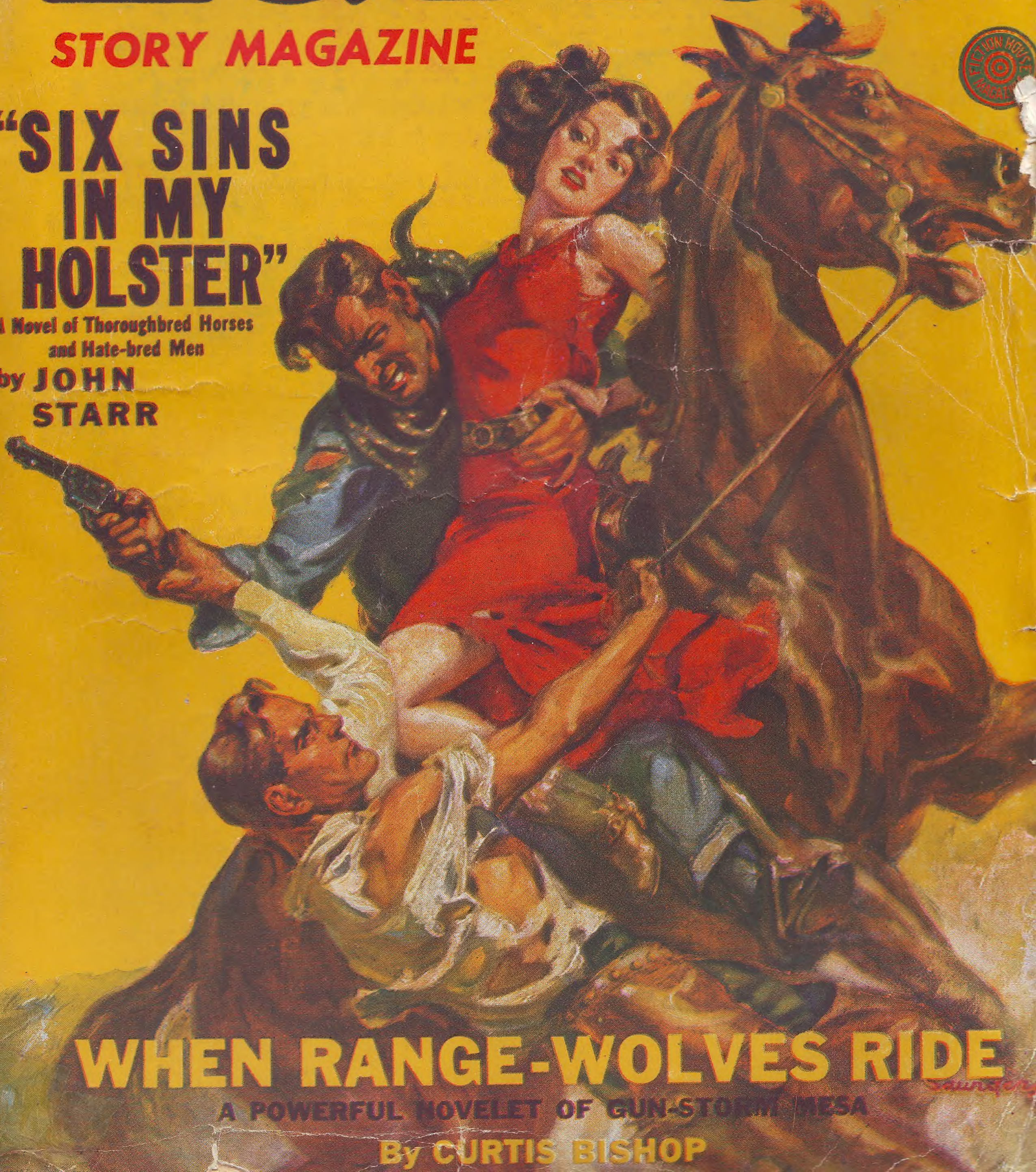
STORY MAGAZINE

FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINE

"SIX SINS IN MY HOLSTER"

A Novel of Thoroughbred Horses
and Hate-bred Men

by JOHN
STARR



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By CURTIS BISHOP

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A Complete Western Novel

WHEN RANGE-WOLVES RIDE . . . . **Curtis Bishop** **3**
Dave Randall stacked smoking sixes against the fiercest longriders ever to cross the Frio.

Two Rangeland Novelets

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You swapped books for guns when you taught the Yellowjacket school.

THIS IS A FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINE

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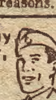

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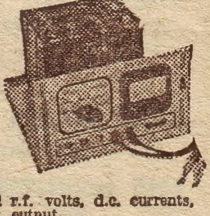

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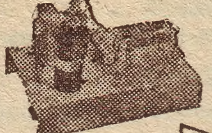

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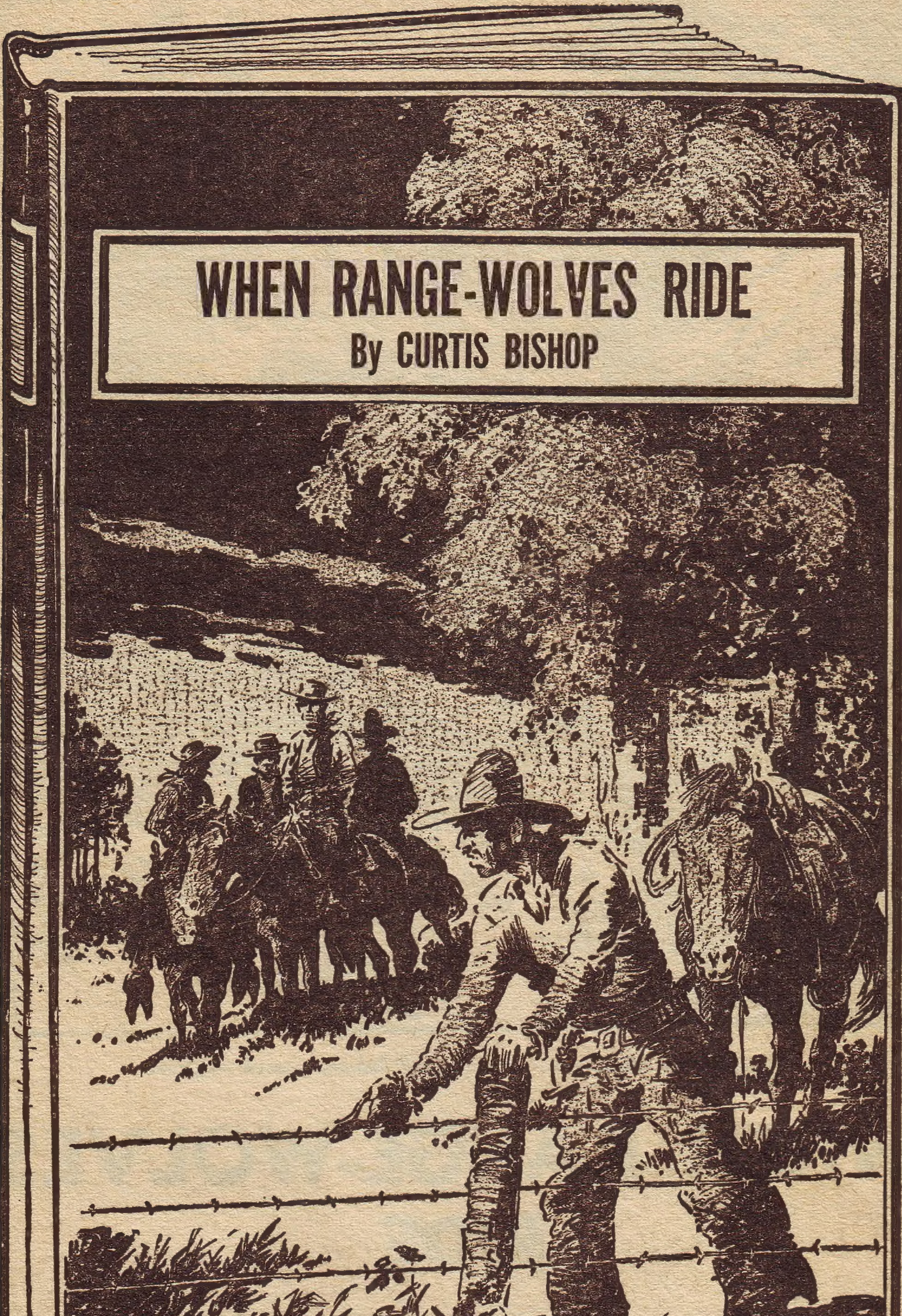
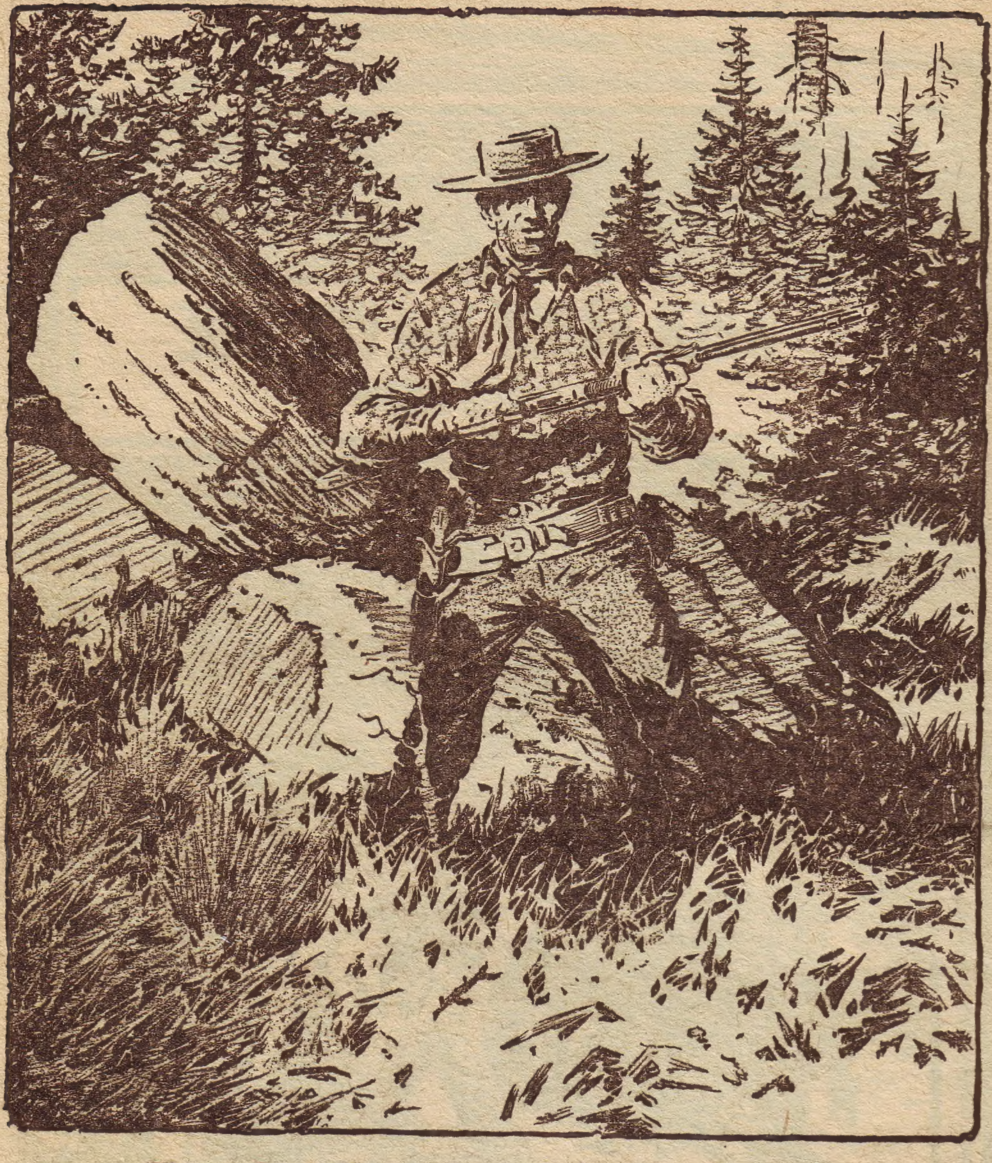
WHEN RANGE-WOLVES RIDE

By CURTIS BISHOP





This was the showdown. Furness and Randall struck triggers.

WHEN RANGE-WOLVES RIDE

A Complete Long Novel

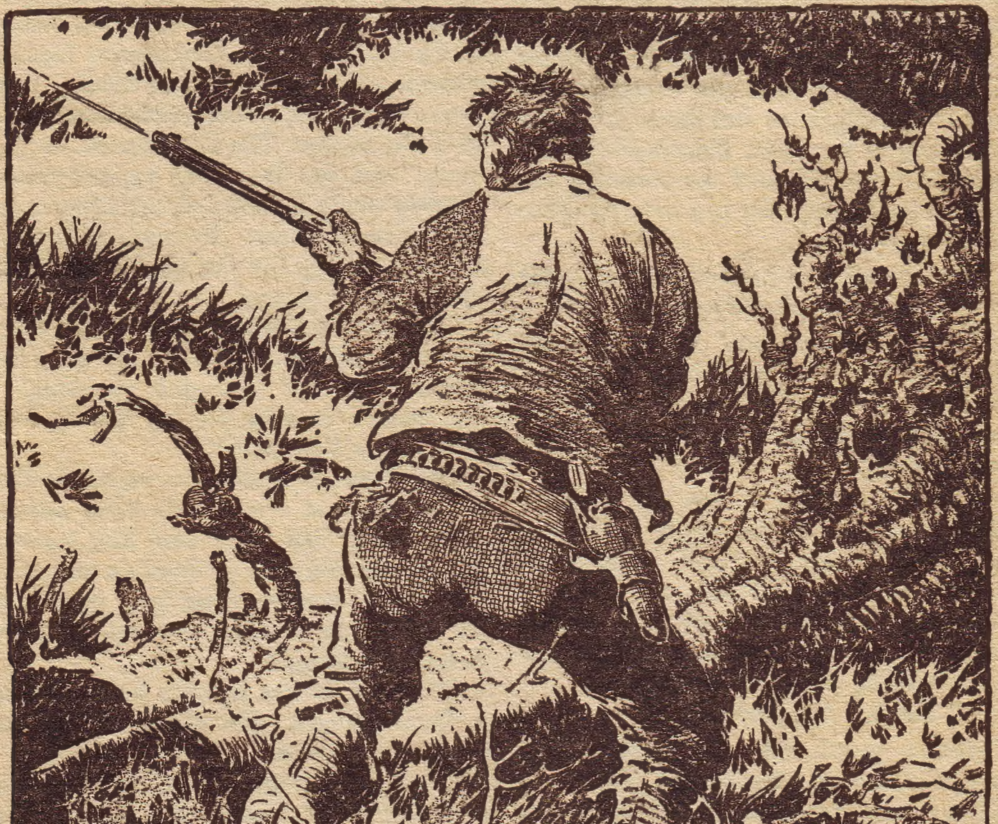
By CURTIS BISHOP

They threw the gauntlet at Dave Randall. Play the Owlhoot game of fast bullets and dazzling dinero—or strike a lone hand against double-cross sixes.

IT was Dave Randall's first trip to Cotulla since his brother's death and his return from a two-year hitch with the Texas Rangers. Several people waved to him as he turned his horse into Denton's stable, then came on foot almost the length of Main Street to the unpainted one-storied building that served as saloon and recreation center for the ranchmen, cattle hands and homesteaders drifting into this crossroad town.

As he walked, he rolled a quick smoke, studying the scene around him rather than the motion of his fingers; even before serving with the Rangers his had been restless eyes. His glance took in the combination store-postoffice, the courthouse and the rock water trough before it, the little cluster of dobe buildings that marked the Mexican section, the high, square houses set back upon the hilly cross streets owned by wealthy merchants and ranchmen who liked to winter their families in town.

All this he saw, but without curiosity; Dave Randall was a man who let another man's business alone, whose life had made him close-mouthed and vigilant, and a little aloof with his salutations. He spoke to the men he passed on the street, casually, impersonally. Some of these men would never be friendly with him again because he had worn a Ranger's badge, and not all of them who felt so would be crooked men. There were still honest straight-dealing Texans who resented the Rangers, who thought each section, each range, should be



left free to make and enforce its own law.

But some had been his boyhood friends, and in this land of today the yesterdays were unimportant and quickly forgotten when friends met, and they rushed to meet him in front of the saloon and for a moment he was swamped with handshakes and shoulder slaps. There was Melvin Furness, with whom he had ridden as a boy, a stocky man with strong lips and hard eyes; Philip Dudley, his companion on many a wild spree in their youth; and Edward Mansfield, whom he had accompanied to San Antonio for a weekend that had been the high spot of his boyhood.

They were together in the saloon, drinking their whiskey straight from the same bottle, and nothing would do them but that Dave join them.

Dave looked from one face to the other —Furness' like granite, yet strangely alive and virile, Philip's too-full lips with a petulant droop to his smile, Mansfield's brittle, animated expression and the gleaming silk of his shirt—always Ed had been the cowboy clothes-horse.

"Well, Dave, how does ranching sit after being a Ranger?" asked Philip with a smile.

"Hard to settle down," Dave shrugged. "It seems funny to sleep in a house and not be on the move. Dark creeps up, and there you are in the same place you were that morning."

"But you're going to run the spread?" asked Furness. There was a demanding note in this man's tone that Dave hadn't known when they were kids, and a hint of intolerance and overbearing that seemed strange in one who had been his favorite pal on hunting trips and cattle runs.

"I'll run it," Dave nodded.

Furness toyed with his glass. "The Lazy Y is a pretty big spread, Dave," he said in a voice too harsh to be purely conversational. "Tom didn't do too well financially, but it's a pretty big outfit. Too big for one man to run, Dave. The only future in the cattle business is big outfits like mine."

MELVIN FURNESS had sold out his Bar-8 ranch to the Rio Grande Cattle Company and become its manager. He lived in the cottage his father had built on the Frio, but now it was a company house and Furness was a hired hand working on salary and percentage.

"You can't buck a company like the Rio Grande, Dave," Furness continued. "If we wanted to, we could crush you right out of business. But we don't play like that. Take Phil and Mansfield, here; we work right along with 'em. When our cattle get on their range, or theirs on ours, we don't have any trouble about it. They ship their stuff to market with ours and we give 'em credit for the sales."

Furness seemed sure of himself.

Dave nodded. He had heard that. The Rio Grande had swept up Furness' ranch, and Turkey-Trot Thompson's Half-Moon, and several smaller spreads on the edge of the foothills. They ran their Tall-T stuff from the peaks down to the river banks, taking in the Concan Government Reserve without a by-your-leave and holding it by force—except for a small section fenced off by Tobe Barker. The Rio Grande, he had heard, was out to sweep up everything. Furness was a restless inferno always eyeing the next hilltop. Furness made more money working for the Rio Grande than the big ranch owners.

"We've been friends a long time, Dave," Melvin continued. "We are going to live here together and we oughta get along. I just wanted to show you my hand. Now what's your hole card?"

Dave Randall studied the impassive face of his boyhood friend with faint amusement. What had come over Mel Furness since he became the Rio Grande's manager? Old friends meeting after long years, and the first thing Furness did was to throw down a challenge?

Dave had all the fighting he wanted as a Texas Ranger. He wasn't looking for trouble right now.

"I'm running the Lazy Y, Mel," he said evenly. "Your fences back up to mine and we both use the Concan bottoms in dry weather. Your cattle are yours, mine are mine. Every time you show me a neighborly kindness, I'll do my best to return it."

It wasn't what he wanted to say to Furness at all. Of all the friends he had looked forward to see again, Furness was his first choice. He had known good times as a boy with Phil and Ed, but Mel had been closest to him.

But, more than Furness' words, there was his manner. The Rio Grande Cattle Company was stating its attitude. What was Dave going to do about it?

Then somebody rushed into the saloon and called out:

"Jury about to come in. Five minutes."

Mansfield, Furness and Dudley downed their drinks hurriedly. His glass half-empty before him, Dave looked from one to another in wonderment.

"What trial?"

"Steve Barker. For rustling."

It was Phil who had answered.

"Steve! No!" exclaimed Dave.

As close a friend to him as Mel Furness was Steve Barker. Steve, a year older, had taught him many things how to run trap lines and stalk antelope. Steve, son of the Tobe Barker who maintained his small spread in the heart of Concan Valley, raising fat cattle in the lush grass around the artesian wells had spent as much time at the Randalls' as he did at home, and Dave's mother, of all the women in the Cotulla area, had never minded that Steve was a half-breed. They had treated him like he was all-white instead of the son of profane Tobe Barker and the fat, mud-colored Piute whom, rumors stated, Tobe had received in trade for four head of wild horses.

"Got him dead to rights, Dave," Mansfield explained, a sorrowful note in his voice as if knowing how this would hurt Dave. "Drove twelve head of my stuff through the fence."

Dave looked at Furness. "Your stuff?" he questioned calmly.

"My stuff," Mel answered promptly. "I filed the charge, Dave."

"If he was guilty," Dave said slowly, "there was nothing else to do."

"Guilty as hell," Furness snapped. "The only thing—this jury won't convict him."

"Why not, if he's as guilty as hell?" Dave asked quietly. They should have remembered that quietness, these three men who had known Dave Randall as a youngster. They should have sensed from his quietness and the way his eyes were wandering again that he was thinking hard, and that it would take very little to set off an explosion.

"Homesteaders and small ranchmen on the jury," Furness explained bitterly. "Old Tobe got a lawyer from San Antone and they wouldn't let a big ranchman on the jury. These —'s think they got a perfect right to run off Rio Grande cattle any time they feel like it."

They were walking across the street to the courthouse now, and the shade of the hackberries felt good after the hot blazing sun. They went up the rock steps, their high heels clattering, and Dave could see how the cowboys in from the bigger spreads came together through the milling crowd until they were almost elbow to elbow and tense and hard-eyed as if awaiting the certain duster across the hills that would set off a stampede. There were a few women, and Dave waved to Phil Dudley's wife when she called a greeting to him. Then he saw a slim, dark-eyed girl pushing her way through the men clustering in the rear of the courtroom rather than taking seats and, after a first start of surprise, knew she must be Helen Barker, Steve's sister. And there was Steve being brought in, manacles on his hands, his face as dark and sullen as the deeply-stained bench behind which sat gimlet-eyed Tallahasse Morgan. Cotulla boasted of its judge and leading attorney. Tallahasse knew his law books like a city lawyer and more than once, condescending barristers from the city had run afoul of his sharp tongue and boundless knowledge. Dave nodded in satisfaction. With Tallahasse there, Steve Barker had gotten a fair trial.

There was old Tobe Barker sitting by the girl now, hair white as snow. Tobe Barker had been white-haired when Dave had first ridden across the Frio rapids and rock-strewn bed to meet Steve for a hunt or a prowl through the mountain country. His silence now seemed bitter like that of a man who doesn't like other men.

Dave stood with Furness and Mansfield. Phil Dudley went off to sit by his wife and he removed his hat with a courtly way that had been his at birth; try as they might the other boys could never come up to Phil's manners and slick way of making women feel at ease before him.

The jury trooped in and Dave could see what Furness meant. Most of them were homesteaders, wearing home-spun broadcloth instead of the gabardine and wool of a ranchman's come-to-town costume, and their faces wore expressions completely contrasting in nature—at once the whipped-down look of a man who knows he is out of place, and then the determined look of a man who intends to carve out a place for himself. Dave had seen many homesteaders with the Rangers, and for the life of him he could never figure out the breed. Bullied, browbeaten, even murdered, yet seldom, if ever, fighting back; yet seldom, if ever, giving up, bowing their heads to the blows rained upon them, yet doggedly pushing ahead. A strong suspicion was growing up that the homesteaders were going to take over the country yet; you could kill one off, or burn one out, and damned if a half-dozen didn't pop up in his place. They seemed to bob out of the hills, as harmless and as deathless as prairie dogs.

The lawyer from San Antonio was easy to spot; he wore a white shirt and a flowing tie and he beamed in self-approval as as sat by his client and patted Helen Barker's shoulder with what seemed to Dave to be unnecessary friendliness. Then the foreman of the jury stood up and nodded when Tallahasse asked if the jury had reached a verdict. The foreman read from a sheet of paper:

"We, the jury, find the defendant . . . not guilty!"

There was an "ah" from the crowded courtroom, and then a murmur, then silence—a heavy ominous silence. The Barker family looked at each other and Helen's arms went around her brother's neck. Shaggy-bearded Tobe turned to their lawyer and shook hands. But there was no triumph in their faces and the tension had not lifted from the courtroom, rather it hung thicker than ever. One kind of law had turned Steve Barker loose, but there was another he must face.

II

THERE was a rebelliousness in Dave Randall which years of hard life in the open had softened, but not crushed. He picked his way through the stern, silent crowd to the defendant's side and held out his hand.

"Howdy, Steve," he smiled.

There were two ways to look at this cordiality of his. Later Dave would say that he was saying howdy to an old friend, a boyhood chum, but he would say that with a crinkle under his gray eyes and a quirk to his thin lips; he knew that by pushing his path to Steve Barker's side that he was cloaking himself with suspicion, and calling danger upon his own head. Dave did not have to be told that when the cattle country squared off in one of its feuds that there were no half-way measures, that no man could be a friend of both sides. Dave was that way himself.

Later, he was to wonder why he had moved so quickly, and with such decisiveness. Steve Barker had been his friend, yes; but so had Ed Mansfield and Phil Dudley and Melvin Furness. Furness was left standing in the back of the courtroom to watch the man who had been his closest boyhood friend walk forward and shake hands with the man who had stolen his cattle. The verdict of the court did not matter to Furness, or to any of the other ranchmen who were also losing beef and were as interested in the Rio Grande's fight against rustlers as though the cows had been their very own. Courts were relatively new to this gnarled twisted land, and it would take another generation to accept their word as final. It was the opinion of these grim-eyed men that Steve Barker was free because of the pompous attorney from San Antonio; because laws had not yet been written to meet the needs of the cattle country. They meant no disresect to the men who wore badges, but still their range was their own, paid for with blood, and sweat and tears, and they looked to no man to ride it for them.

Steve looked more like an Indian than ever; of Tobe Barker's two children, Steve and Helen, one was like their mother, coarse-haired and full-featured and deep-eyed, the other liked neither of them, more like a woman that had been lost in Tobe Barker's unknown past, a Virginia girl perhaps, or a tiny French mademoiselle. Helen was slight and dark, but not with the darkness of an Indian, and her eyes were a deep-set blue, blue and yet so dark one could never be sure of their color. She had been a schoolgirl when Dave had left home, until old Tobe had taken her out of school to spare her the slights of her schoolmates who looked down upon her as a half-breed. Now she was a young woman, slim and lovely and flashing-eyed, straight and tall and as graceful as a creature of the wild.

"It's good of you, Dave," Steve murmured, grasping Randall's hand. "I won't forget it."

"Thank you, Dave," Helen said softly. "It's good to know we have *one* friend."

Tobe Barker said nothing. He rolled to his feet and grunted to his children:

"We go home."

Helen followed obediently but Steve shook his head.

"I'll stay for a drink with Dave, Tobe."

Both of the children called him Tobe. He thought a moment, his eyes almost lost behind shaggy brows. He looked Dave up and down, and then nodded. Helen followed him out of the courtroom. Tobe looked neither to the right nor to the left but Helen seemed conscious of the stares and murmurs, and the bold looks of admiration the cowboys shot her. Her cheeks were crimson and her lips trembling when they reached the door.

No one spoke to them; they spoke to no one. There were those in the courtroom who sympathized with them, but they were individual homesteaders and small ranchmen who dared not show their sentiment before the cold, angry eyes of the Rio Grande men.

Steve watched them out of sight before speaking.

"I don't want a drink, Dave," he said then in a hoarse strained voice. "I wanted them out of the way. There will be trouble, Dave. I won't get away alive."

His speech was that of a white man but he was an Indian through and through, with dark piercing eyes, long black hair which fell in coarse rivulets, high cheekbones, dusky color. He had always been an Indian, Dave recalled. He had never liked ranching and, with that in common, he and Dave had disappeared together on long hunts and wild mustang roundups. Steve Barker no more belonged inside the three-strand barbed wire fence that his father had thrown up in the Frio bottoms than the fence itself belonged there, keeping the ranchmen off land that should have been theirs for common usage under the unwritten law of a free range, and keeping Steve Barker in, when he should have lived in hills that knew neither fence nor a white man's home.

"I didn't steal Furness' cattle, Dave," Steve told him earnestly. "What would I want with cattle?"

What indeed! Now they were walking together out of the courtroom, down the creaking stairs and under the locust trees. Hard looks came their way; they ignored them.

They reached the dusty street and Steve stopped and held out his hand. "I'll grab my horse and catch the folks, Dave," he said.

Tobe Barker and Helen and the buckboard were already out of sight down the winding road that led to the Painted Rim, the Frio River crossing and the Concan Valley.

"So long, Steve," Dave smiled. "Come over and see me. We got lots of visiting to catch up on."

"I'll come," Steve said slowly.

Then he walked toward the Henderson general store and went inside. Dave turned back to the courthouse. There was a group of men beneath the locust trees, Furness and Mansfield and Dudley and tall gaunt Jobe Carson, whom Dave had never seen in a good humor. And there were dozens of other men nearby, cowhands who had drifted in since Dave had left. Furness puffed on a cigar, his white even teeth showing out of the corner of his mouth.

Tension crawled up the dusty street, strong enough to touch Dave's nerves. Then, very suddenly, everyone was facing the Henderson store. Mel Furness and his circle of grim-lipped ranchmen moved closer to the street. When Steve Barker came out of the store, he would have to look directly into their faces; that day he had looked into the face of one law; now he must meet the accusing eyes of another, and this justice was not tempered with mercy.

INSIDE they could see Steve at the counter. He finally bought something, stuffed it in his shirt and came back out on the street again, reaching into his pocket to pull out his tobacco. He put his head down while he rolled the cigarette, the brim of his hat shading his eyes. Dave knew that he was thinking, that he was sizing up the crowd loitering around the courthouse, especially the group of men under the locusts.

Dave knew what he was thinking. His

horse was at Denton's stable, a hundred yards away. He had no chance of reaching it alive if he made a run. Even if he ducked behind the store, out through the rear entrance, he would still have to come into the open to get his horse, and that would be enough. If he made a run for it, a man-hunt would be on and there were fully sixty cowhands about to whom a man-hunt would be a welcome diversion. Perhaps he could carry some of them with him into blackness, Mel Furness certainly, but it was not in a man's nature to walk into death voluntarily, not, at least, a man who loved life and the open.

The long silence held on. Barker's fingers rolled the cigarette back and forth until the paper became crushed and the tobacco spilled. He could do nothing but wait, Dave thought. He had run beef off the Rio Grande range and, if Furness didn't shoot him, another would. One kind of law had held him innocent but this other law marked him guilty. He had his jury, yes; they were it—judge and jury and prosecuting attorney and executioner all in one, while Steve's only defense lay in his holster.

There was a growing sharpness to Steve's shoulder-points until at last, when he could no longer endure it, he dropped the cigarette and pulled up his head and showed the gray bitter color of his face. His shoulders dropped and he seemed to let a great breath out of him. Still he did not look directly across the street to the men standing under the locusts. When he did, Furness would speak to him, and gunshots would follow.

All of this time Dave Randall had been watching, and thinking. He knew the way these men felt about a rustler and a few years ago he would have been one of their number, standing with Furness and looking accusingly, and unpityingly, at the man on the stone steps. But Dave had been with the Rangers and he had sworn to uphold the law and order, to squelch the rule of the six-gun. Strong men did not forget such an oath overnight. Now there was no badge strapped to his shirt and his place was by Furness' side, in the circle of cigar smoke, but he didn't go there.

No, he didn't join the men under the locust tree. Instead he sauntered across the narrow dusty street and nodded to Steve as if seeing him for the first time and he took his tobacco sack out of his shirt pocket and looked across at the courthouse yard, standing shoulder to shoulder with Steve, gunbutt to gunbutt.

"Let's get our horses, Steve," he said in a clear voice audible to those in the courtyard. "I'll ride a piece with you."

Five minutes before Steve Barker would have protested, but now he was grateful for the company. Never had Steve been so lonely as in those long seconds standing before Henderson's store, the accusing eyes of the countryside trained upon him.

There was an answering chorus of murmurs, swelling up and down the dusty inert street. They knew Dave Randall and they had heard more about him than they knew. Rumors had trickled back of his work with the Rangers, of his fight against the Poggin gang in the lower Valley, of his gun duel with Snake Corbin on the banks of the Brazos. Barker was not a feared man, though no one doubted that he could shoot straight, but Randall was something else, a gunman on his way to becoming a cattle country legend. Steve could get one, even with his dying motion, but Randall, Dave Randall . . .? No man there could snake out a gun as fast, or strike as often with deadly lead.

Again that strained silence. It was not the nature of these men to back away. No one wanted Randall's black guns looking at him but no one was of a mind to run and hide if those same guns flared into sight.

Melvin Furness broke the silence by moving across the street to intercept them. He was a heavy man, and slow. He looked heavier and slower alongside these two tall lean men who looked down at him. His chin threw the lower lip over the upper, adding to the square bulldog cast of his expression; and in his narrow beady eyes was a flaming hatred for Steve Barker and anyone who stood with him—including Dave Randall. Dave knew that Furness was now his enemy, a cold-blooded ruthless enemy.

"What's this to you, Randall?" he growled.

"What?" Dave asked with forced light innocence. "I'm just walking to the stable with Steve. He and I are going the same way for a spell. Just thought we'd ride together."

Mansfield and Dudley followed on Melvin's heels.

"Step over here a minute, Dave," Dudley said nervously. "I want to explain something."

"Some other time, Phil," Randall answered carelessly. "We'll have to hurry to get over the Rim by sundown."

"Dave, old boy," put in Mansfield, lines of concern on his handsome face, "this is something you have no call to butt in."

"Are you still a lawman, Randall?" snapped Furness.

"Nope," Dave said lightly. "Why?"

"Then it seems to me you ought to stay out of a private fight," said the Rio Grande manager.

Dave shook his head. "I'm not getting mixed up in a fight, Furness. What's between you and Steve is none of my business. If you want to call him, go ahead."

Dave sensed the tension in Steve's body.

"But," he went on, swinging around and looking at the locust trees and raising his voice slightly, "Steve Barker is my friend. If you want him, Furness, get him alone. Go on, go for your gun if you want to; I won't try to stop you. But I'll blast the living hell out of any pot-shooting hombre that tries to make this a cold-blooded killing."

He didn't turn to see the cold smile on Steve Barker's face; he could sense it.

"Go on, Furness," invited Steve, dropping his hands to his side and leaning forward. "Make your play alone."

It would come now, certainly. Never had a man been so challenged on a Cotulla street, and both lived. Dave stepped aside, moving closer to the locust trees. There was room for Furness and Steve to do as they liked.

But the challenge had been so unexpected, and so deadly in a quick-tempered country, it caught Furness with his guard down. He showed them a stunned wonder, and then they waited for him to say the only thing he could say. Nobody accepted that kind of talk.

Furness was not afraid. He looked from Barker to Randall and back again, and there wasn't a trace of fear in his probing eyes. He was angry, yes; and the muscles of his chest were swollen and his lower lip was twitching, but his speech was calm and deliberate, as if he had thought over each word, and the possible effect.

"Get out of this country, Barker," he order. "Get out and don't come back."

It was an empty threat in reply to the half-breed's positive challenge, but the force of Furness' personality, his record of fearlessness convinced them that Furness was not flaring into battle-anger, but that this matter would not end here. Then he turned to Randall and the same unholy fury still burned in his gaze.

"We were friends, Randall," he said slowly. "Good friends. But I'm running the Rio Grande and when I work for an outfit I let nothing stand in my way. Maybe you didn't know that. The friends of the Rio Grande are my friends, its enemies are my enemies."

"I can appreciate that," Dave murmured.

"Good. Now we understand each other."

He looked back to the silent Steve. "As long as you are on this range, Barker, we'll look for you. Better get out."

With that he turned on his heel and strode off. "Want a drink, boys?" he called back to Mansfield and Dudley.

They hesitated, looking to Dave with pleading eyes, then followed Furness. Steve and Dave walked slowly to Denton's, waited outside until their horses were brought, then rode away, rode slowly and deliberately without a backward look.

III

DAVE RANDALL had not asked for his story but he told it, nevertheless "I didn't rustle their stuff," Steve explained. "You know the Rio Grande runs cattle in the valley right up to our fences. So did your brother, so do Mansfield and Dudley. Sometimes even Carson. They hate my old man's guts for fencing off the artesian wells and they have tried to buy him out. There ain't enough money in the world to buy that section, that's how stubborn he is."

He rolled a cigarette before continuing. "One morning a part of our fence was down and when I rode up there were some of Dudley's cattle inside our land. I ran 'em back and braced the fence. While I was doing it, up rode Furness and four of his boys. He said one of his men had seen Rio Grande stuff in our lower pasture, the one down by the river. I told him if that was so we would run it back in a day or two, as soon as we come across it. He said he was coming in and look around. I told him to stay away from the fence, that I didn't mind him coming over myself but that my old man would shoot him on sight and he knew it. He said he was coming in anyhow. I started to hold him off but didn't. I didn't mind him looking around; I just didn't want the old man taking a pop at him. I rode down to the lower pasture with him. One of his boys saw a dead steer in the brush. It had his brand on it. It had been shot with a .22."

"A .22-caliber!" exclaimed Dave. Guns of such small caliber were practically unknown. A .22 was good for nothing but target practice or killing light game, and nobody in this region hunted light game. Except, that is. . . .

"I have a .22," nodded Steve. "Nobody else in this country has one. Then Furness accused me of running his steers through the fence and shooting one of them. He said he was going to have me arrested."

"I shouldn't have gone with him, but I couldn't take it seriously. Hell, I hadn't bothered his cattle. Neither had the old man. Maybe some of them slipped through that gap in the fence like Dudley's stuff and wandered down to our lower pasture, but there was nothing wrong with that; your brother's stuff gets through, so does Dudley's and Mansfield's, and at roundup we always run 'em back. You can remember helping us drive stuff out?"

Dave nodded. Old Tobe Barker and his son were more conscientious about returning strays than other ranchmen. Usually a rancher just figured the other fellow ended up with as many mavericks as he did and that it would all balance out in the course of a year. If a brand was good and plain, they would run it back, but an unbranded calf, or a faint brand, was just swept up in the roundup and pushed through to the branding pits without a thought in the world of breaking the law.

"But I found out different," Steve said bitterly. "They clapped me in jail and wouldn't let my old man make bond. The Rio Grande and the big boys like Mansfield and Dudley and Carson own the sheriff and the district attorney, lock, stock and barrel. Damned if they didn't charge me with rustling and make a trial of it. There was nothing we could do but get a lawyer and fight it."

Dave nodded again. It was an easy story to understand. The range wanted Tobe Barker out, and would use any means to get him out. Had his steer been found in Dudley's pasture, or even Dave's, Furness would not even have accepted pay for it . . . would have laughed and said: "mebbe the fool cow shot himself." In a range so broad and rich, with cattle so plentiful, there was no call to start a war over one cow. Or even twelve. Probably the Rio Grande's crew butchered as many during a Winter for their own barbecuing, and Furness paid no attention to the waste.

They had reached the Painted Rim now. Here they separated, Steven turning off down the winding rocky road to the green lush valley surrounded by solemn crags and crevices, to the ribbon of shiny silver that was the Frio, peaceful and beautiful this August day.

"What are you going to do, Steve?" asked Dave, rolling a smoke himself and staring down at the valley with somber eyes.

"I dunno. Me, I don't care. I had just as soon pull out as not, though I'm not afraid of fighting the whole damned country. But my old man is here to stay. We ain't got enough range to make money and we can't get a yard on either side of us. We just get by, and we're overgrazing our land now. In a few years we can't run as much stuff, and then we'll slowly starve to death. But I can pull out on him and Helen. I guess I'll stick around, and watch behind me."

"Furness won't shoot you in the back," Dave declared.

"I dunno," Steve murmured again. "He ain't the same fellow we knew as kids. He's managing the Rio Grande Cattle Company now and he figures on taking over the whole country. He thinks everybody oughta get out of his way. And my old man won't git."

Neither spoke for a moment, then Steve said, his voice faltering and uncertain: "There was trouble between him and your brother Tom, Dave."

"I heard that," Dave nodded. "Over Tom's wife, wasn't it?"

Steve nodded, his face flushed with gratitude that Dave understood his motive for bringing up such an unpleasant matter. Men were killed in this country for repeating such gossip. But Steve wanted Dave to know.

"There was talk about her and Dudley, too," the half-breed ventured.

"She's an attractive woman," Dave said curtly. He spurred his horse gently.

"Gotta go, Steve. Come over and see us."

"I'll be over," Steve promised.

There was no gratitude spoken by the younger Barker. Unquestionably Dave Randall had saved his life, but men here did not speak of gratitude and friendly obligations. Speech was unnecessary. Dave and Steve had stood together once, and words were not needed to cement such an alliance.

DAVE turned north through a gentle roll of hills carpeted with bunch grass and loosely studded with locusts and hackberries, scraggly cedar and scant mesquite, a few twisted pines and rebellious live-oaks. On this, the west side of the valley, the land rose step by step to the summit plateau, and, as the elevation carried him upward, he could look down upon the meadows and cross-cut valleys and the silver-streaked Frio roving restlessly from one rock cliff to another.

He had come back to this country hesitantly, even a little resentfully; but once here, he had realized immediately he was back to stay. There was the awkward question of the Lazy Y ranch, a good spread but no bonanza like some of the lower valley outfits, but that could be solved somehow. Before the solution had been simple; Dave wanted to roam and Tom wanted to stay, and there was never any talk of money passing between them. The ranch had been half his and Tom had never insisted on a settlement. Now, though Tom had left no will and it was doubtful what a court would decide, the ranch jointly belonged to him and Tom's widow, Leila.

Dave's first reaction when he learned of Tom's death, trampled by an unruly horse, was to say "to hell with the ranch;" he would stick with the Rangers. But in the next breath he had known he wouldn't. He resigned his commission, won with the smoke and fire of his guns, and returned with enough capital to re-build fences and spread out if the opportunity presented itself. Like many another ranch, the Lazy Y needed new grazing land, and the old pastures needed respite from the hungry cattle.

Lack of capital caused that more than ignorance. A ranch would pasture less and less each year, and a ranchman couldn't bring himself to voluntarily shut off his own income by running fewer and fewer cattle, and, even if he could raise the capital, there wasn't land around him to buy. Thus the outfits like the Rio Grande Cattle Company were forever spreading out, and not caring how they spread. Men like Mel Furness were on a quota and they had to produce; to produce they had to have fresh range; to get fresh range in this country, a cattle ranching land for two generations now, they had to push unwilling neighbors aside.

He continued to ride upward—the Lazy Y headquarters house was high. This was government land he was riding through, and four of them grazed cattle upon it, the Lazy and the Rio Grande, Mansfield and Dudley, with some of Jobe Carson's stock coming in during the dry weather. Across the river was the section owned by Barker with the rich flowing wells that they wanted more than they did the land. Their fences encircled the open government range and kept all others out—except a few straggling homesteaders. These were forced out, sometimes peacefully with just a word of warning, sometimes with guns. Cattle made scattered hunches here and there, most of it Rio Grande stuff; they rested by the willows growing around the waterholes. This was good range.

Then, just at dark, he sighted the glint of light from his ranch house, shining across the flats.

Leila was in the living room when he entered, sewing with quick artistic motions. There was no better-dressed woman in the Cotulla country than Leila, not even Cynthia Carson, Jobe's pretty daughter, or the Martin Mann women, who had the most expensive frocks in San Antonio tossed into their laps.

Leila was a pretty woman. Her hair was dark and her eyes a rich brown and her lips curved and full, like her graceful body, mature and appealing. Most women in the ranch country were showing signs of wear at thirty, but Leila Randall was still untouched by the hard life of a woman who must run her house without help. Yet she was a busy woman. No house was kept as spotless as hers, and no housekeeper had done as much to create a refined atmosphere on as little.

She moved to fix his supper, graceful and strong.

"How was town?" she asked.

"Oh, so-so," he murmured. "Steve Barker was turned loose."

"Indeed? Then I guess Mel Furness will see to him."

"He'll try," Dave agreed.

The intimacy of their relations worried him. He and Leila had never been too friendly, though never actually clashing. Tom married her while Dave was gone and he hadn't seen much of her. But now they were living in the same house together, and she was fixing his meals. Something should be done about it, Dave realized, but he didn't know what. Perhaps it would not cause talk for another man to live with his brother's widow, but not Leila Randall. The countryside had been talking about Leila even before Tom's death. Now, with no husband, alert eyes and scalding tongues would be quick to catch upon her every move.

He could not understand Leila, Here Tom was dead only a week and she seemed completely reconciled to keeping house for her husband's brother. She was as cheerful as if there was no shadow arising between them, as if Tom Randall had never lived and it was the proper order of things for Dave Randall and herself to be sitting on the porch together and looking out over the fading prairie.

What he could not understand was the quiet was in which he was beginning to accept her presence. Leila was not a forward woman. In the few days she had made no obvious effort to attract Dave to her; yet she had, with a strong compelling attraction. Dave looked at her and felt that she had come to sit on the porch beside him not because of her impulse or his, but because it should be that way, and that they as individuals had nothing to do with it, and no power to resist it. He did not like the helpless feeling.

He stirred finally and murmured that he must go to the corrals. When he returned, Melvin Furness occupied his chair on the front porch.

Furness stood up but did not offer to shake hands. Dave nodded and walked into his room and went to bed. But not immediately to sleep. Their low voices disturbed him, and he lay and smoked one cigarette after another and gazed off into the darkness broken only at each hilltop by a single fugitive star.

FURNESS did not leave the Randall house until past midnight. Instead of returning to the Rio Grande headquarters he veered his mount to the south and picked his way through the brushy foothills to Phil Dudley's. He called softly outside Phil's window and a light flared on immediately. Phil had been expecting him. Doris Dudley, tired-eyed and silent and moody, made them coffee and they drank it hurriedly. Then they picked up Ed Mansfield. At the Rio Grande headquarters Ed and Phil waited while Furness went to the bunkhouse and aroused four sleepy-eyed cowboys. The seven of them rode abreast down the rim road and into the Frio valley, close enough to the everlasting springs flowing out of Tobe Barker's section to hear the murmur of the water against the rocks.

One of the cowboys at Melvin's orders cut the wire fence that was Barker's challenge to the demand for a free range, until yard after yard of it lay useless on the ground. The others rode through the brush and before them, as they rode back, lumbered sleepy, angry cattle, giving vent to their displeasure in loud bawls.

"The man just owns a section," Furness said grimly. "We'll overrun it. Sooner or later his grass will be gone and he'll have to get out."

A half-hundred head of Rio Grande stock, with an occasional cow bearing Dudley's brand, poured through the gap in the fence. Then the seven men rode across the valley, fording the swift shallow river, cut around the treacherous bluff that frowned down upon Tobe Barker's small defiant spread, and repeated their performance on the north end of Barker's pasture. By mid-day several hundred head would be grazing off Barker grass. Steve and Tobe would run them out, of course, but not for days would all of the cattle be separated.

"We'll keep doing this," announced Furness. "If we can't run him out, we'll eat him out."

Dawn found them riding through the willows of the lower rapids. High on the rim perched Randall's house they could see faint wisps of smoke rising from the chimney.

Furness knew where he was riding. The day before one of his line riders had reported a nester in the pines by the spring back of Dead Man's Bluff. The sky was still gray and heavy as they rode up to the small clearing. A dog barked and a light flared up in the two-room cabin sometimes used by the Rio Grande as a Winter camp, and all too-often seized upon by fugitive nesters as a home. They reined up and Furness sent his deep voice booming out into the stillness of early morning:

"All right—come on out."

Inside they could hear voices, a woman talking with suppressed excitement; then the door squeaked open and a man's dim shape was framed in its black square.

"What are you doing here?" demanded Furness. "This is Rio Grande country."

"Are you Mister Furness?" asked a man in a dim tone.

"I am," Melvin snapped.

He climbed from his horse and walked closer. He faced a thin gaunt man, well past middle age.

"I'm Furness and I don't like homesteaders on this range," he snapped. "I'll give you 48 hours to clear out."

"Now look, Mister Furness," argued the nester in a respectful tone, "this is government land, I know it is. Maybe I owe you for his cabin, or somebody, but . . ."

"Don't give me that government land stuff," broke in the Rio Grande manager. "You damned nesters are all alike, hollerin' about on this free-land business. You throw up a shanty, plant a few acres and then steal our meat to feed your families."

"I don't steal no man's meat," protested the nester. "My name is Hugh Sheffield and I got a good reputation as a farmer back East. I ain't gonna touch your cattle and . . ."

"You're all liars, every damned one of you!" sneered Furness.

Sheffield recoiled. His lined face in the early light showed quick anger, then sullen resentment.

"No call to curse me like that, Mister Furness," he protested. "I ain't done nothing to you."

Furness strode off without answering. He walked with heavy quick steps down to the spring. As his line rider had reported, it was fenced off. He seized one of the posts, flung it down. Then he strode back and glared at Sheffield.

"When I ride back here this afternoon I want all of that fence down. Day after tomorrow you be out of here. Every part and parcel of you."

"But, Mister Furness," argued Sheffield, "cattle get into that spring and it ain't fitten to drink. Where am I gonna get water for my wife and kids?"

"Drink the same water the cattle do until day after tomorrow," shrugged Furness. "I'm not furnishing water or meat for a damned nester."

"I ain't asking you to furnish anything," cried Sheffield, his voice rising in angry resentment. "This is free land and that is free water. I got a right to . . ."

Then Sheffield's wife called from inside the house. "Hugh, watch your talk. You know these men."

Sheffield didn't move.

"Damned right she knows us," gloated Furness. "Sheffield—or whatever your name is—this is Rio Grande country and don't think you can get by living here. If you're not gone by day after tomorrow, we'll burn this house and you in it. Now get out."

With that Melvin turned on his heels, mounted his horse and motioned for the other riders to follow him. They had not taken part in the conversation. Evidently Dudley and Mansfield were as willing for Furness to speak for them as the Rio Grande hands themselves.

"We're gonna have to kill a nester or two to stop this," growled Furness.

Behind them they heard a baby's frightened cry.

IV

THE Lazy Y could not afford a full-sized crew of line riders. There were Rusty Ike Brown, a tobacco-chewing range veteran; "Jackrabbit" Henderson, a cross-eyed youth with a contagious wit and a capacity for hard liquor which took up that part of his forty per the Cotulla marshal didn't exact in fines for his misdemeanors; and Pancho Vega, a silent mixture of Indian and Mexican who took off prize money at all the bronc riding contests.

These men had been with Tom Randall for years and were with Dave now, as wedded to the Lazy Y as Dave himself. Perhaps "Jackrabbit" might wander over the horizon and catch on with another outfit, but as long as they were treated squarely, Rusty Ike and Pancho would be there each morning just after sunup for their breakfast, their mounts already saddled, their slickers out if the weather was bad. Like the nester, the cowhand was a queer enigmatic breed. The fortunes of the ranch he served meant nothing to him, except to his fierce unreasonable pride, but once a hand had served his apprenticeship, and come to call the owner by his first name, he was as trusted as the owner or manager himself.

The Lazy Y spread itself was simple to ride and maintain. It was the canyon-like valley, over which the beef of four outfits roamed, which kept them on their toes. That, by unspoken agreement, was split into sections, or "spheres of influence." The Lazy Y maintained the stretch of lowland from the painted rim to the river, doctoring any cow they found that needed attention regardless of its brand. The Rio Grande, with Mansfield and Dudley, worked the opposite bank of the river, far bigger in its sweep and harder to ride.

The Lazy Y stuff was in fairly good shape. The pasture on this East side of the river was sparser than across the rapids, but the weight was good and the three hands had kept everything up after Tom Randall's death. As they rode along, they eyed the bunches of cattle with professional eyes, occasionally cutting out one of Furness' cows and driving it across the rapids onto home grass. They worked to the river bank by noon and could see the adobe chimney of Tobe Barker's house. Dave, with sudden inspiration, announced he would ride over and see the Barkers. He was aware as he forded the river that he wanted to see Helen as much as he did Steve.

Tobe had the prettiest spot in the country for a house—a grove of willows sheltering the artesian springs which flowed 10,000 gallons of water a minute and formed a pool deeper than a man's head. Here they had swum as youngsters—Ed Mansfield, Phil Dudley, Steve and Mel Furness. Years ago the cowhands of four outfits had forded the river to eat their noon-day meal in this valley, with no more than a wave of their hand to grinning Tobe and his Indian wife. But now this was forbidden range to the bigger outfits and . . .

Zing!

The bullet tore through the hackberry foliage close to Dave's head. The report, and the crashing of the leaves, caught him by surprise; he threw himself from his saddle in a desperate leap and scrambled for shelter.

Zing!

Another shot crashed through the undergrowth.

"Tobe! Steve!" Dave shouted at the top of his voice. "Lay off. It's me, Dave Randall."

There was no other shot and he could hear horses approaching from opposite directions. The elder Barker came up first, riding a black mare with markings as white as his beard, and Tobe carried a rifle over his saddle horn.

Dave stood up and waved to the old man. "It's Randall, Tobe."

Steve Barker burst out of the brush on the opposite side of the clearing.

"Hold it, Dad!" shouted the young half-breed.

But his shout of warning was unnecessary; Tobe Barker did not raise the rifle. He rode close to Dave, looked down at him a moment with inscrutable eyes, then rode off without a word.

"Don't do that anymore," pleaded Steve as he rode up. "Didn't you know the old man was shooting on sight?"

"I didn't think about it," Dave said ruefully. "And he means business, doesn't he?"

"He means business," the younger Barker said grimly.

The half-breed's coppery face glistened with perspiration and the flanks of his horse were lathered in sweat.

"Been riding hard?" Dave asked idly.

Steve's mouth tightened. "Somebody cut our fence last night and pushed a lot of Rio cattle in here," he explained. "We're trying to cut 'em out."

"Why not let Furness worry about that?" asked Dave.

"But they're eating our grass," explained Steve moodily. "Throw a couple of hundred head of cows in on a section, Dave, and it doesn't last long."

Dave nodded. "I see."

"More of Furness' dirty work," Steve said bitterly as they rode toward the half-adobe, half-lumber house. "They figger on eating us out, Dave. And mebbe bushwhacking me."

Dave nodded again, clucking gently in sympathy. "But I'll get a few of them first," flared Steve. "I'm carrying my rifle with me these days, Dave. You may be called upon to bury some of those friends of yours."

"They aren't my friends," Dave denied.

Helen came to the doorway of the sprawling house, a queer conglomeration of Spanish and American architecture, and waved gaily.

"Helen will be tickled pink to have you for lunch," Steve said slyly. "She gets lonesome out here."

"A pretty girl like her," exclaimed Dave.

"Some of the folks around here have ideas about half-breed girls," Steve said shortly. "And Helen has ideas about some of the others. We don't have any friends in this country, Dave—except you. The old man wouldn't let the others on the place even if Helen wanted to see them."

She wore a red scarf tied around her dark hair and a gaily-colored frock of a similar pattern. Her slim legs were bare, as were her tanned shoulders, and Dave knew he was looking upon the prettiest girl in the Cotulla country, if not several countries. Her tanned cheeks were faintly flushed as she came in to greet him, holding out her hand like another man. Men and women always shook hands in this simple, friendly and straightforward region.

"It's good to see you, Helen," Dave murmured.

She flushed again, then turned off with a smile and pointed to the heavy oak table in the adobe dining room. "You could use some biscuits, I know, Dave Randall. You could always eat more than anybody else."

Tobe clomped in and took his place at the head of the table. He did not speak during the whole meal, or favor Dave with a single glance. The Indian woman he had taken for a wife ate silently, too, but she had a twinkle of approval in her dark eyes as she pressed biscuits and ham and beans upon Dave until he threw up his hands in despair.

Then Tobe leaped up and stalked out. Steve followed with an apology.

"Gotta get these cattle out, Dave. See you later. Stick around for supper."

Dave declined but he didn't rush back to join the boys across the river. He rolled a cigarette and watched Helen's graceful movements with the satisfied eyes of a man well-fed and content. She helped her Indian mother clear the dishes, then Ma-aw sent her off.

"Go show Dave the spring," grunted the Indian woman, eyes twinkling again. "Ma-aw finish dishes."

Helen looked to Dave and he nodded. She led him through the clustered hackberries to the limpid water surging up from between the rocks. There he sat with his back against a mossy trunk.

"You're a pretty girl, Helen," he murmured.

She showed neither embarrassment nor pleasure.

"Yes," she agreed shortly.

"I'm surprised," he went on, "that you aren't married already."

"Whom would I marry?" she shrugged.

Then, rippling the water with her hands, she murmured bitterly: "I'm a half-breed girl, Dave. Men don't marry half-breed girls."

He sat and watched her and compared her to his brother's widow, Leila. Of late he had found himself thinking about Leila more and more often. There was a sturdiness about the woman and she inspired companionship in a man. Leila was no mystery, not even to Dave who knew little of women. She was a woman who was attractive to men, and a woman who could not exist without a man. Leila had her charm, and it was evident at a glance. But this dark-eyed slim girl, the daughter of silent Tobe Barker and an Indian squaw, was an enigma. She was beautiful, yes, with a wild untamed beauty, but there was something else, and one could not put this mysterious quality into words. In looks, in dress, in actions she was as civilized as Leila, but there was still a suggestion of the unknown about her, the deep unknown. Leila attracted men, Helen challenged them.

Suddenly bold, suddenly carried away by an irresistible impulse, Dave reached forward and caught her hand.

"I'm coming to see you, Helen," he said slowly. "When I hoot like an owl, make Tobe put up his rifle."

She raised her dark eyes and studied his face a moment, studied him without embarrassment or pretense, then nodded.

"I will be listening," she said simply. "I will tell Tobe not to shoot."

ED MANSFIELD and Phil Dudley were riding a lot with Furness these days. Sometimes Rio Grande cowhands were with them, sometimes they rode alone. It was late August and the valley brush was overrun with cattle, some their own, mostly Rio Grande stuff, and from now until late September, when the big fall round-up would be held and a big percentage of the beef shipped to market, they would be busy. Besides, there was the feud with old Tobe Barker and his son. Every night or so there were holes in the Barker fence and the cattle of three spreads pushed through. The pasture in the valley was fading except for Barker's section, where the everlasting springs kept grass and brush a bright green until late October. Knock down a fence and the green-hungry cattle would swarm through. The grass elsewhere in the valley was turning into sun-cured wild hay, and cows turned their backs upon it for the green glint.

There were no cowboys with them when Furness headed for the Sheffield place. They came over the ridge so suddenly that they caught the family eating supper under a lone hackberry tree by the spring.

It amused Furness to see the complete shock his arrival produced. Mrs. Sheffield reached for the smallest child, wrapping her apron around him, while Sheffield stood up. There were two other children, one an attractive girl in her late 'teens, the other a boy no more than twelve. All of them were quiet and tense. Furness proposed to make an example of them. A nester deserved nothing, according to Furness.

He rode his horse right into their table, knocking it over, dishes crashing to the ground. The girl had to fall back to keep the horse from stepping on her. As she fell, she flashed her uncovered legs as her dress flew high, and Furness smiled broadly.

Then he looked to the trembling Sheffield, and the smile left his face.

"I told you to get out," he growled.

Sheffield knew he couldn't fight back. There were three of these men, and they wore their guns low with rifles strapped to their saddles. There was an expression in his eyes at the moment pretty hard to read, bleak and dismal. He shook his head:

"I haven't any place to go," he explained. "I'm seeing about a place over across the river. Honest I am."

"I told you to be out yesterday," Furness croaked.

"But a day or so won't matter," Sheffield begged. "I tore down the fence as you said and the cattle are drinking here. What am I hurting here, Mister Furness?"

"You nesters hurt plenty. You can't settle this country."

"A day or two longer won't matter," persisted Sheffield.

"No more argument," Furness snapped. "I'll give you a half-hour to get out."

He climbed from his horse and stood watching their expressions of fear, a sneer on his face, his shoulders slung forward and his legs set far apart. Melvin Furness was enjoying himself.

Sheffield didn't move, stood with head down and eyes on the ground as if hard-caught by indecision and futility. Furness stared at the girl and was irritated by the judgment he discovered on her face. He took a step forward, reached out and caught her chin firmly.

"You're a pretty filly," he murmured, eyes boldly approving.

Sheffield came to life now. The gaunt

nester caught Furness' hand and flung it aside.

"Keep your hands off her," he ordered, suddenly afraid no longer.

"Why, you old—!" growled the Rio Grande manager. His hand leaped swiftly to his holster and came up with his gun. He slashed the old man's head with his gun butt and Sheffield dropped heavily.

Sheffield's wife screamed and ran to him. The girl and boy watched in terror while the baby began to cry wildly.

"He ain't dead," growled Furness, "just out cold. Run that wagon out here and we'll give you a hand with him."

"But he needs attention," protested Mrs. Sheffield. Her voice showed some education, though her face and eyes were the withered, helpless look of a woman whose life has been a hard one.

"Water from the spring and a few rags will do it," shrugged Furness. "You have twenty minutes to get out of here. Better collect your stuff before we burn you out."

Woman and girl looked at each other in horror and indecision, then back to him. What they saw in his hard face confirmed their instant reaction.

"Roll the wagon out, Johnny," ordered Mrs. Sheffield.

The baby on its quilt pallet cried unnoticed while woman and daughter rushed to rescue their few belongings from the crude home. Johnny rolled out the rickety wagon from the leanto and Furness helped lift the unconscious nester into the bed of the wagon. Mansfield and Dudley dismounted and began to help the women with the furniture, dishes and supplies. Furness stood apart and regarded them with a sneer, holding his watch in his hand.

The wagon loaded, and the sleepy-eyed horse brought from the make-shift corral and harnessed, Furness beckoned to Mrs. Sheffield. He had been watching the girl all of this time.

"If you folks want to come and work for me, I can put you up for the winter," he proposed. "There's a cabin back of the ranchhouse that would be all right with some repairs. I can use the old man riding fences and you and the girl in the house."

The woman's wrinkled face came up with sudden defiance and her stooped body straighened with sudden pride. "I reckon we ain't interested in working for the likes

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of you, Mister Furness," she said slowly.

The small boy had already climbed onto the wagon. He added his shrill voice to his mother's defiance.

"And when my dad gets well," he choked, "we'll kill you, that's what we'll do."

Furness guffawed. The girl had already mounted the wagon. Mrs. Sheffield handed her the baby, and climbed up herself.

Phil Dudley leaped forward and assisted her. Furness chuckled. Gallant Phil, always the lady's man. The girl drove while Mrs. Sheffield climbed into the bed of the wagon, bucket of water and rags in her hand, and began to administer to her husband's wound as the wagon began its shaky progress up the rocky bluff road.

Melvin Furness looked at his watch and nodded approvingly. All this had taken only 18 minutes. That showed people could move when the proper man got after them.

He scraped together shavings and old rags and lit a fire at the base of the crumbling porch steps. Within a moment, bright flames were licking at the base of the old line cabin which would never give shelter to another homesteader.

FURNESS stepped back and smiled with satisfaction. Then, wiping the perspiration from his face, he drank deeply from the spring.

When he returned to his horse he noticed Mansfield staring at him with a peculiar expression. Furness looked from Mansfield to the blazing house and chuckled.

"Well, that's the last nester we'll have there," he said grimly.

Then he swung up into his saddle. Mansfield was still staring at him.

"What's the matter, Ed?" jeered the Rio Grande manager. "Getting soft-hearted?"

"Might be, Furness," Mansfield said slowly.

"Things like this have to be done, Ed," shrugged Furness. "We got to keep this valley free for cattle."

"But you had no call to hit the man. He was within his rights, making you take your hands off his daughter. How would like somebody to grab your girl like that—if you had one?"

"Nester's girl," Melvin chuckled. "I guess I ain't the first man to handle her."

"No call to say that either, Furness," Mansfield said in grim disapproval.

Furness had started off; he reined up his horse and studied Ed with challenging eyes.

"What are you after, Ed, a quarrel?" he demanded.

"No use to quarrel," Mansfield answered in that same low tone. "It's already done, and I had my part in it. But this is my last ride with you."

"What do you mean by that?" barked Furness.

"I mean this so-called partnership of ours is split up," Ed declared. "I don't want homesteaders on this range any more than you do, but I won't be a party any more to beating unarmed men over the head with a gun butt, burning their houses and grabbing at their daughters."

"Seems to me you're making a lot of fuss over a damned nester, Ed."

"It's the principle," said Mansfield tonelessly. "You're getting hard, Furness. You're willing to go to any extreme to have your own way."

"I'm running Rio cattle in this valley if that's what you mean," the stocky man shrugged.

"Not with *my* help," Mansfield answered. "When you see my cattle over on your part of the valley from now on, give 'em a push toward my fence. I'll do the same for yours. And keep your gun-slinging hands off my property."

"You don't mean that, Ed?" protested Furness, surprise getting the best of him for the moment.

"I mean it," Ed declared. "And don't think for a moment that I won't tell the straight story of your feud on the Barkers if it comes into court again. I'm through with you and that's final."

Phil Dudley, who had been listening to all of this with wide-mouthed wonder, spurred his horse between them. A single ill-considered word by either and both would be clawing at their guns and one, if not both, would not ride away from Dead Man's Bluff and the family of nesters, creaking along in their ancient wagon, would have the last laugh after all.

"Break it up," Phil said sharply.

Dudley intervened because he could not sit by and watch two old friends shoot each other down in a sudden burst of anger. Later their anger would settle into dull resentment and each would be careful not to cross the other, knowing what would come. Men could hate each other and yet live as neighbors the rest of their lives when this first sudden flareup was quieted.

It was quieted now. Mansfield reined his horse back and Furness rode off without a backward look. Dudley spurred his horse and caught up with the Rio Grande manager.

Mansfield rolled a cigarette without moving, then, with a shrug, rode toward the Randall house perched high on the painted rim.

Dave was on the porch, Leila sitting across from him. Leila went for coffee without a word as Ed rode up; they sipped it sitting on the steps and looking across the green-streaked valley.

Ed offered no explanation for his unexpected visit and said nothing of his quarrel with Furness. They talked of casual things, of the cattle, the grass, their ever-constant need for rain, and then Ed pulled on his expensive sombrero and allowed he would have to amble if he reached home by suppertime.

Dave walked with him to the gate and, as Ed swung into the saddle, held out his hand.

"Come back, Ed," he said heartily. "We don't visit enough these days."

"I'll bring Edith over with me," Mansfield said with a nod. "And you come over, Dave. Edith can still bake the best pies in the Cotulla country."

"No doubt about that," Dave grinned. "I gotta look over my stuff in your pasture tomorrow. Maybe I'll drop in for supper."

"Do that. We'll be proud to have you."

He lifted his hat to Leila, watching from the porch, and rode off.

V

JOE VANCE, whose Twisted S ran to Dave's south fence, almost to the edge of the painted rim, told him about the Sheffield family, and where they had gone. On one of the benchlands dropping from the rim to the river bed was a pine log cabin with a mud fireplace and hackberry floor, and there the Sheffields had gone with their wagonload of possessions. Vance was not sure whether the cabin was on his land or Dave's. Neither was Dave.

Joe was a big hulking man, with gnarled twisted hands of a gentleness of speech and motion that belied his size.

"What do you figger on doing about it, Dave?" he asked.

"Hadn't thought about it," Dave parried. "Why?"

Joe had found him starting out from the corral with Ike and Pancho. They both sat their horses as they talked, and Vance beat a tattoo on the rail fence with his quirt.

"Reason I asked," Joe murmured awkwardly, "was that I've been knowing the Sheffields sometime. I've been sparking the girl some."

"Yes," Dave smiled. "Well, maybe it's about time you settled down some, Joe."

"But that ain't all I'm worried about," Joe put in hurriedly. "I'm a small guy, Dave, and it looks like the Rio Grande are out to push all of us small potatoes off our land. I wanted to ride over and see what you figger on doing about the Sheffields, and about this tie-up of the big outfits."

Dave reflected a moment. "Maybe the Sheffields are on my land, maybe they're on yours," he murmured, "so you can tend to that. And I'm not hooked up with Furness or Dudley, if that makes you feel any better."

"It does," Vance said immediately. He hesitated, then said slowly: "Some of us ain't going to be pushed any further, Dave. Small folks have got rights. There's a hell of a lot of them in this world—and they got rights. Me and Tom always got along fine but I didn't know how you stood."

"I figure on being as good a neighbor as my brother, Vance."

Joe tossed away the cigarette he had been smoking and grinned beneath his hat brim. "Then you'll be a good neighbor, Dave. Thanks about the Sheffields. I'll tell the old man you're not going to bother him."

"Not unless he bothers me," Dave said. "In fact, tell him to come up and borrow coffee or meat if he runs out of it. Tell him on this side of the valley we're human beings."

The big youth rode off with a wave and another happy grin. Dave shook his head as he rode after Ike and Pancho, sent to ride the lower fence and cut out foreign stock. What Joe Vance felt was taking place in the minds of lots of men in this country—himself and Ed Mansfield among them. They were typical riders, born in the saddle and trained to cattle, loyal to the idea of free range and big outfits; but they also believed in rough justice and strong individualism, in the policy of live and let live. Melvin Furness was bumping into that philosophy as he raged over the valley with his rule-or-ruin ideas and that philosophy was bigger than Mel Furness or the Rio Grande; he couldn't stamp it out.

As a Ranger, Dave had probed into range wars, and he knew how dangerous they could be, as encompassing as a prairie fire, and as menacing. He had not figured on Vance being drawn into the feud that began with Tobe Barker's stubbornness in clinging to his Con-can section, but that was the way of a range war; there were no neutral parties. They would all be in it if actual shooting broke out. None of them would come to the aid of Tobe Barker, except Dave, but once black powder stained the top of the rim, Furness would look into more gun barrels than he had ever thought possible, and his hard-riding hard-shooting Rio crew would find itself outnumbered and outridden.

In the meantime, however, Tobe and Steve and Helen Barker might be crushed. Ike and Pancho were already moving stock out of the upper bottom. There was quite a bit of Rio stuff in there, and Dave was ready to believe what other ranchmen had hinted . . . that Furness fed his cows far from home as much as possible so as to preserve the grass around his own corrals. It seemed a little thing to flare up over how much wild grass a few cows could eat, but that was important in this country; grass was their life blood. Low prices never broke ranchmen; it was always overgrazing.

But this was something you couldn't put your finger on. Protest to Furness and he would be very apologetic. "Didn't know the damned cows were over that way, Randall. Run 'em home, will you? Or tell me and I'll send the boys after 'em the first chance I get."

They reached the river bank by noon and Dave told Ike and Pancho to work on downstream until he caught them. Ike grinned slyly, and Dave wondered as he turned off if old Ike's suspicions were correct; if he had paced their drive so as to be right across from the Barker house by noon and thus have a good excuse to join the Barkers for dinner.

Dave forded the river and crashed through the willows, shouting to Steve to prevent another fusillade from old Tobe's rifle. Then his roving eyes sighted something which made him ride out of his way a bit. At the southeast corner of the Barker fence he found Ed Mansfield—dead.

HE examined the body with experienced eyes. Bullet through the forehead, a small neat hole as if from a low-caliber gun. Dave found the bullet lying in the sand. He picked up the shapeless mass of lead and studied it carefully. It would easily be identified as a .22-caliber bullet, and nobody in the section but Steve Barker owned a .22.

There were signs of other horses in the brush, but that meant nothing. Probably not a day passed but what the Rio boys came this way, or even Dave's crew. There was no sign of Mansfield's horse. If Ed had fallen straight backward, then the bullet had come from inside the Barker fence. That was not conclusive evidence, as there was no telling how a man would fall when hit by a light-caliber bullet, but a district attorney would make much of it and a jury could not help considering it.

Dave was a lawman no longer but these things he observed, and made note of, to report to the sheriff. Everything he saw pointed to Steve or Tobe Barker as the guilty man.

Mansfield, he judged, had been dead for several hours, 10 or 12 at least. Rigor mortis had set in long before as Ed's body was stiff and cold.

Dave stepped off the distance to the Barker fence. It was a full ten paces. Evidently Mansfield had been following a rough cattle trail which led from the river back to the bluffs beyond, and to his own home.

He could have been just riding back from Dave's. No, he would have reached the river just after dark and he had not been dead that long. Dave estimated the hour of his death as about midnight, and his opinion would be accepted as expert by the court.

Ed's gun was in its holster. It had not been fired. There could be no plea of self-defense.

Dave realized with a curse that he would be the strongest witness against Steve and Tobe. He would have to testify that when he came riding across the river in broad-open daylight that a shot had screamed close to his head, and that Tobe Barker had been ready to shoot again. It was well known over the country that old Tobe would shoot any man who tried to come onto his property.

A court might overlook that, in the light of circumstance. But Ed Mansfield had been riding on government land, following a trail which came no closer than ten paces to the Barker fence! That could be nothing but murder.

While he studied the ground around the body for further signs, Steve sighted him from the house and rode over with a shout of welcome. When the young half-breed saw Mansfield's body, his face whitened.

"God!" he exclaimed. "I haven't heard the old man shoot this morning."

Dave studied his friend's coppery face. Never had he seen such an eloquent demonstration of innocence. All Steve thought of was that his father had sighted Mansfield nearing their fence line, and had fired.

But old Tobe Barker did his shooting with a bigger gun than a .22.

"He was shot with a .22, Steve," Dave told him.

"Then the old man didn't do it!" Steve cried out happily. Then realization struck him, and his dark face blanched again. "My God, a .22!" he exclaimed.

"Did you do it, Steve?" Dave asked slowly.

The half-breed shook his head. "Certainly not," he answered promptly. "Not Mansfield anyhow. If you ever find Furness like that, you can bet even money it was me. But not Mansfield."

Dave thought a moment. "Could Tobe have used your gun?"

"Possible," Steve replied slowly, "but I doubt it. Why should he use mine? He never lets his get a foot away from him. But I don't think the old man did it, Dave."

"I'd like to think not," sighed Randall. "But here is the body right across the Barker fence, he was killed with a .22-caliber rifle and you're the only man in the section who has a gun like that, and old Tobe had warned the rest of the range to stay off his property. You've been having trouble with fence cutters and you know Mansfield had something to do with that; he knew about it even if he didn't do any cutting himself."

"Yeah, Ed had something to do with it but Furness is the only man we got anything against," argued Steve.

"You don't have to argue with me," Dave sighed. "I'm just pointing out what the district attorney will tell the jury. Where was Tobe late last night?"

"He and I rode the fence awhile," Steve admitted. "We were going to watch for fence cutters."

"Did you ride together?"

"No," I went one way and Tobe the other."

"You didn't ride this fence?"

"Tobe did," Steve said.

"Did he have your .22?"

"No."

"Where was it?"

"In the stable, the saddle room."

Dave thought swiftly. This was no alibi. Very easily could Tobe have gone into the saddle room and taken the .22. There was no reason for his doing so. But no reason why he shouldn't, except the trouble.

"It will go hard on the old man," Dave murmured, "or you. Mebbe both of you. This is pretty serious, Steve."

The youth nodded. The lines of his copper face were working and there was a far-off look in his eyes.

"Tobe didn't shoot him, Dave," said the youth. "When we got back to the house he told me he didn't see a soul. He said he heard horses out in the valley but we didn't pay any attention to that, of course. The Rio Grande riders go all over here."

Dave shook his head. "It's bad business, Steve," he stated sorrowfully. "Maybe you'd better get your lawyer back."

Steve was looking off into distance

again. He looked back to Dave and his dark eyes were like black pools. "No lawyer," he said jerkily. "If I skip out, everybody will think I did it. Tobe can deny it and say he knows nothing about it. Everybody will hunt for me."

It was hard advice for Dave to give. He had been a Ranger and had sworn to see that the law took its regular course. But he could see why Steve Barker should want to disappear, and let the killing go on record as charged against him instead of his father. He had been dragged into a courtroom once, and, though freed, there were a dozen gun-toting riders around who would shoot him on sight.

"Maybe that will be a good solution, Steve," he murmured, surprised at himself for speaking so. "At least for a while. Nobody knows this country like you do. Keep clear of the other spreads. Come to mine whenever you want something."

"I suppose I have a little time." Steve said slowly.

"Some," Dave admitted. "I'll carry the body over to the house. Then I'll ride in and report to the sheriff. It will be dark before anybody can get back here."

"Good," said Steve. "I want my bedroll and some cooking utensils. And my gun. I'll take the .22."

He turned his horse away and galloped back to the adobe house. Dave decided against following him for dinner. He looked at Mansfield's lifeless body again and studied the surrounding terrain.

Then a frown creased his lean face. The bullets had struck Mansfield square in the forehead, coming from straight ahead of him. Unless Mansfield had turned in the saddle as he rode, and looked toward the Barker fence, the bullet could not have come in that direction.

But if old Tobe had shouted at him, Ed had looked around—then that would explain the slant of the wound. Dave couldn't believe that Tobe hadn't done the shooting. He was convinced of Steve's innocence, but grizzled old Tobe, growing more bitter with the years, could be the man who fired on a neighbor riding across his land.

Dave knew feeling would run high when it was learned Ed Mansfield had been shot. Everybody had liked Ed. Men who had been neutral before would be on the side of Furness and the Rio. It would anger them that a half-breed had shot down a white ranchman. Furness would not trust the law again, and the rickety Cotulla jail, with the gray-haired sheriff and his two deputies, would be useless against their angry surge. And other men would ride with Furness on a mission like this—Phil Dudley and Jobe Carson and Martin Mann.

Dave shook his head and rode on to Mansfield's house, Ed's body lying across the saddle in front of him. Mounting the cap of the rim, he looked back. The Barker house was visible, a spot of adobe in a patch of green. A rider was leaving it, and Dave nodded in approval. That would be Steve.

DAVE lingered in town after reporting to the sheriff. There were things to buy for Leila, and for the first time in many months he had a disposition to stand at the bar and down one drink after another without joining in the talk. Conversation centered about Steve Barker and Mansfield's killing. The sheriff and his two deputies had ridden out immediately but found their quarry gone; and, then as rumor swept the region like a prairie fire, other men had ridden into town. Jobe Carson and Mel Furness and Phil Dudley had stomped into this saloon and out again. Only Carson had challenged Dave.

"How do you sit in this, Randall?" old Jobe had snapped.

He was past sixty but still as straight as an oak and as wiry as a willow. Furness, Dave had mused as he watched, whiskey glass in his hand, would never be as big in this country as Jobe Carson.

"Sitting out this hand, Jobe," Dave had replied. "Mansfield was a friend of mine. So is Barker. I'll let the law take its course."

"By God, we won't!" snarled Carson. "We'll find that damned half-breed and string him up the biggest tree in Cotulla County. What do you say to that."

"Go ahead," Dave murmured.

Furness had nothing to say to him. The stock man was grim and menacing, and he had a dozen of his riders with him. As yet the Rio guns hadn't barked out, but the threat was there. As far as gunplay went, the Rio Grande could probably fight the rest of the country by itself. Furness hired a lot of men, more than he needed. All of them looked and acted like they could shoot.

The sheriff came in with news that Barker had fled and by nightfall two different posses had taken to the hills. One group was led by Carson and Furness, with the Rio gunmen at their heels the other was the sheriff's posse, some boys from town, a few hands from the Mann outfit across the divide.

Dave gathered up his purchases and rode slowly back to the Lazy Y. From the rim top he could see a light burning in Tobe Barker's house, and he had to fight down the temptation to ride over and see Helen.

Leila had heard the news . . . it was amazing how rapidly such stories could spread. She pressed him for details and he gave them reluctantly.

"Anybody would think," she observed tartly, "that you were taking Barker's side."

Dave did not answer. The accusation made him wonder. Whose side *was* he taking? Could he stay neutral? He believed Steve innocent and Tobe guilty, but alliance with one Barker was as bad as another. He wondered if Tobe and Helen would come through this unscathed. If they found Steve, and lynched him, perhaps their anger would cool and the other Barkers would be left unharmed.

"I'm turning in," he said curtly, wishing to escape further conversation. He was a long time going to sleep, however. He smoked cigarettes and listened to the sounds of the night. The painted rim was a big bass drum against which all of the sounds of the entire valley echoed, and he could hear parties of men beating through the brush of the valley, could hear their shouts, and then he could hear the rattle of gunfire. He stiffened. Could they have trapped Steve so close to his home? Then, in the next breath, he knew that was impossible. Steve knew every ravine, every boulder and every cranny in this entire region. They couldn't smoke him out on such short notice. He would leave no trail to pick up and they would have to spread out fan-wise and beat each yard of brush and rock. But, Dave knew also that Steve would not go far away. Tobe and Helen needed him close by, and he would linger in the rough terrain off the beaten trails, moving furtively from hide-out to hide-out, creeping in at night for his supplies.

Then, maybe an hour later, he heard a horse galloping toward the house, a single horse, and he sat up in alarm. Leila was still up and he could hear her go out into the yard and then Helen's voice, excited and tearful.

Dave slipped into his clothes and met her at the door. She ran straight into his arms, her head against his shoulder, sobbing like a child. He stroked her dark head and looked over at Leila and frowned at the strange expression on the woman's face. Leila was looking at Helen and there was hatred in her eyes if Dave had ever seen it, a dull impersonal hatred.

"What's the trouble?" Dave asked softly.

"Dad," gulped the tearful girl. "Dave, they shot him!"

"They!"

"Furness and the rest of them. Dad went out to meet them when they came onto our land and opened up on them. They shot back. Dad was hit several times. When Mother and I went out to pull him in, they shot at us, too. Then they stopped."

She gasped for breath and went on in the same choking tone: "He was dead when we touched him, Dave. They shot him to pieces."

Dave patted her shoulder gently and pressed her face back against his shirt. He should have known this was coming. He should have known that when a posse came onto Barker land that old Tobe would be out to meet them.

"Leila, make us some coffee," Dave said over the girl's shoulder.

Leila looked at him stonily for a moment, then with a shrug of her shoulders, went into the kitchen. He could hear the clatter of dishes. Dave sat down and took Helen in his lap as one would a child and held her closely.

He said nothing; he knew nothing to say. He held her tightly until she raised her head and wiped the tears from her face and by then Leila had brought the coffee and Helen drank gratefully. Leila did not join them.

"Could you—come stay with us tonight?" Helen faltered. "We're frightened."

They rode together down the treacherous rim road and Dave watched with a glow of admiration the way this slim dark girl could handle her horse. Only an expert rider could pick a path down this steep rim in the darkness.

He found Helen's mother moaning over Tobe's lifeless body in the front room. The old man had bled copiously; crimson stained his white beard and long hair.

The Indian woman was sing-songing in her native tongue, rolling her fat body back and forth. Dave rolled a cigarette and sat glumly. There was no telling where this was going to end. Steve Barker was still free and Steve was more Indian than white man; there would be other blood shed, other lives lost.

Finally Helen insisted he sleep. He took Steve's bed, but sleep came slowly. He could hear the Indian woman's sing-song and, occasionally, Helen's sobbing. Then he heard a man's voice talking, and the Indian woman answering him—in dialect. He was half-dreaming at the time and he wasn't sure whether Steve had actually come or it had just been his restless sleep. He did not ask the next morning.

VI

WHEN he awoke breakfast was ready and he ate flapjacks, bacon and eggs. Helen and her mother had dressed old Tobe in his Sunday suit, and black broadcloth affair too tight for his big stomach. But, Dave mused grimly, Tobe wouldn't mind a little discomfort now. Their eyes were still red but neither wept; both went about their work in an efficient calm manner. Women could never mourn long in this country. Life had to go on, though one might be tempted to ask why.

Helen went with Dave to drive Tobe's body into Cotulla in the buckboard while the Indian woman stayed behind. She had not been to town in twenty years and didn't want to go. This section was her home; she would not leave it.

"What are you going to do about the place?" Dave asked Helen.

"Ranch it," she said resolutely. "I can ride like a man and shoot almost as well. Old Tobe is dead, but there is still a bullet for the first man to cross the Barker fence."

She spoke like her savage mother, or her half-savage brother.

In town they drove to the preacher's. Old Tobe had been a devout church member in his younger days and he had asked that he be given a church funeral when he passed away. He had not attended a sermon in long years, but that was because he resented the way people looked down their noses at his Indian wife. More than once Dave had seen the old man under the hackberries reading his Bible.

Dave paid a brief visit to the saloon. The bartender told him that Tobe had killed two of the Rio hands and that Mel Furness was vowing to wipe out the whole Barker breed. There had been no sign of Steve. Rio Grande riders, together with a few of Jobe Carson's boys, had the Barker place surrounded. Dave chuckled to himself. He was almost positive that he had heard Steve's voice the night before talking to the Indian woman. He also was informed that the Rio Grande had bought out Mansfield's cattle and most of his range, leaving Ed's widow only possession of the ranch house and two sections on top of the rim.

Dave nodded glumly. He was not surprised. Slowly but surely Furness seemed to be getting everything he wanted.

While he was drinking Furness entered. Two of his riders were with him and they came to the bar. Dave looked away but the Rio Grande manager would not have it so.

"Well, Randall," gloated the stocky man, "we smoked out one of your buddies last night."

Dave nodded. "Must have been a glorious feeling," he said dryly. "You and your whole crew finally shot him down—an old man standing framed in the light of his own house. But he got two for one, at that. I wouldn't boast about that if I were you, Furness."

"What difference does it make?" Mel asked with maddening coolness. "We'll pay the price to get him out. That Con-Can valley is going to stay clear for our cattle."

"And mine," Dave spoke softly. "Or

do you figure on running me out, too?"

"Maybe," Furness grunted. "You've played your hand wrong, Dave. You came back here and teamed up with the opposition. It looks from here that it's just a matter of time until you get yours, too."

"I never was a patient man," Dave retorted, color mounting in his cheeks. "If you have any ambitions along that line, why put it off? Or aren't three of you enough?"

One of the line riders thrust his two-bits worth into the conversation. He was tall Tom Hanover, a squint-eyed cowboy from New Mexico.

"Shall I take him, boss?" Hanover asked eagerly. "I know he's been a Ranger but he just has two hands like the rest of us."

Hanover's gun was low and his holster was worn. Dave looked him over calmly and appreciated the flicker in the tall man's eyes. Hanover was a fair and open fighter, at least, living by a hard code, but probably a straight code. Hanover would rather face his man in a saloon, giving him warning, than shoot him down from the brush.

"No," Furness denied.

"He had rather shoot me down some night when I step to my door to see who's coming, Hanover," Dave said goadingly.

"By God, I've had enough, Randall!" cried Furness.

The stocky man's boots seemed to crush into the floor as he jumped forward. Bringing up his arms, Dave realized he could have drawn his gun and ended this—it would have been self defense; even Hanover would have sworn to that. Instead Dave went forward a half-step and met him with bare fists. He drove Furness down with a hard right and left.

Melvin lifted himself from the floor, dashing a hand across his face to scrub the bright quick blood on his cheeks. One of Dave's fists had caught the flesh of his lips; and one raw strip hung down, redly swaying over his mouth. Dave pressed in with a right into the wide, hard pit of Mel's stomach and the stocky man swayed a little, windless and shocked. Dave drove his blows at the huge jaw, hooking his punches up against the long shelving chin. Furness dropped his head and Dave, missing his target, smashed his knuckles against the bar and felt pain knife along his left arm. But he struck Furness with his right, and when Mel reeled backward he rushed in for the kill. It was a mistake. Mel's great outsweeping arms caught him in a bear's hug and drew him in, crushing his ribs. Dave's arms, thus held, could reach nothing; he pulled himself backward, seeking to break the grip, but Furness held on, weathering the punishment, tightening his grip until Dave felt his skin burn and seem to burst. There was a swollen tightness in his face and neck; his breathing came out of him short and insufficient, each spasm straining his vitals.

Dave struggled to free his head. Furness lifted his hold and Dave pulled one knee behind him and drove it into Melvin's crotch. The stocky man cried out and his arms let go. He kicked out as Dave fell, and his foot caught solidly at the base of the spine, a brutal blow. Dave rolled completely over and came up against the bar. He stumbled up, weary and bruised. But Furness, lumbering toward him like a huge bear, was worn, too. Dave leaped forward and, twisting away from the strong hairy arms, thundered both fists into Mel's face; then seized the stock man by the neck and put all of his remaining strength into one last desperate push.

It was all he could do; it was as if a hole had opened to gutter away the last of his energy. Dryness froze his throat so that he could not swallow; his leg muscles were dead and the pit of his stomach set up a steady trembling.

Furness lay still on the floor, lying on his right side, body quivering and eyes open, too spent to move.

Dave took a drink. The raw liquor burned him in a dozen places, as if his lips were a myriad of cuts. But it gave him strength to go to the back room and wash his face. There were no cuts on him which needed bandaging, but he was a mass of bruises and welts. One eye was closing rapidly.

He had another drink. That trembling of his stomach had to be quieted.

Now Furness was stirring. The bartender was wiping his face and the Rio Grande boys were regarding Dave with disgruntled hostility. He waved to them jauntily and stepped out into the street to meet Helen.

She was coming from the general store, a slim wraith dancing before his uncertain vision. The sun hit him hard and he would have fallen if she had not rushed to him and caught his arm.

"What in the world, Dave Randall!"

"Fell against a door," he murmured.

"You mean Mel Furness?" she guessed, recognizing the horses drawn up in front of the saloon.

"He don't look so good either," Dave grinned.

She unhitched their horses and helped him into the saddle. After a few moments his head cleared and he slowly regained his strength. Even though they rode easily frequent spells of dizziness hit Dave and swept him along like a feather wafted on a breeze.

Helen clattered away from him at the road crossing and he rode on alone, steadying himself with his hand on the saddle horn. The guy was tough, damned tough. He would be hard to kill.

As he rode up to the Lazy Y he caught a fleeting glimpse of a paint horse tethered in the mesquites back of the water tank. Steve!

STEVE was smoking and staring out over the valley from the back window. He gave Dave a mirthless grin.

"Howdy."

Dave sensed that he already knew of his father's death.

"I know about it," Steve said slowly, as if guessing his thoughts.

Dave looked at Leila. The big woman was fixing supper but she looked up to meet his glance, and he shook his head in wonder at the expression in her eyes.

"How's camping?" Dave asked lightly.

"Not so good," Steve shrugged. "They're crowding me pretty close. Keeps me doubling back and forth all the night. They're really after me, Dave. I didn't think there would be so many."

"It will be worse now," Dave said. "Old Tobe got two of Mel's riders."

"Just two," Steve said in disappointment.

"How many are you going to get?"

"How many are there?"

The half-breed stood up with a sigh. "But I'd better not hang around here, Dave. Just dropped over for some grub."

"What do you need?"

"Anything to eat."

Dave walked into the pantry and started handing stuff to him. Bacon, cans of tomatoes and beans, flour, salt, coffee, sugar. Steve was finally loaded down. He turned to leave.

Dave stopped him. "Anywhere I can reach you if I need you?"

"You know the old spring back of Gold Gulch?"

Dave knew the place. "I stay pretty close to there," Steve said. "Usually sleep in the brush in the daytime."

Barker cautiously looked out of the door before leaving the house, then went for his horse on a dead run. Dave watched him out of sight, then came back to the supper table. Leila had the meal ready.

He tried to talk to her but she did not seem interested in conversation. There was a far-off look in her eyes as if she did not see him at all and a queer smile lurked around the corners of her mouth.

After dark Dave pulled on his hat. "I'll ride down and see about Helen," he announced.

The mysterious smile on the big woman's lips broadened.

As soon as he was out of sight, she left her rocking chair and went into her room. She started packing her clothes and personal belongings into her suitcases. Then she went to the door and called for Pancho.

"Hitch up the buckboard, Pancho," she ordered.

The Mexican line rider looked up at the night as if to protest against going anywhere in such darkness, but moved to obey with a shrug of his shoulders. Leila stood watching him with that same smile.

She was a man's woman, a woman who had to have a man. Perhaps she was casual and careless in her men. Certainly Tom Randall never had inspired any great affection in her, but she had been a good wife to him until his death despite rumors that floated up and down the valley. Other men had wanted her to leave him—Mel Furness, for instance. Had it not been that it was against her queer code to leave one man for another, she would have gone to Furness; she liked men with drive and ambition and ruthless force. Too, she liked wealth and comfort.

But she had closed her eyes to Mel's pleas. When Dave had come back, lean and self-sufficient, she had postponed giving Furness her answer until she had seen "how it worked out between her and Dave." It was not love in the sense that women ordinarily loved, for Leila did not love like that. Hers was not a romantic heart. In return for a man's support and strength you kept house for him, cooked for him and lived with him. Dave had fascinated her more than any other man, even Furness. With the superb confidence of a woman who has had men pursue her all of her life, she had never doubted that Dave would want her, that Dave would follow his brother as her husband. But now it was clear where Dave's affections lay. Since that morning, since Helen had burst into their cottage in the early-hour darkness to throw herself into his arms, Leila had known that she must give up Dave as a bad bet, and turn to Mel Furness.

Pancho helped her load her possessions into the buckboard and she drove away without a backward look. A queer woman, yes; it did not once occur to her that half of the ranch, and the cattle, were hers, and that she could force either a sale or a partition.

Mel Furness was sitting on his porch, his head swathed in bandages. He leaped up as the buckboard approached and met her at the gate.

"Leila!"

He swept her into his arms and kissed her despite his sore battered lips. She was a woman to arouse any man, even hard-bitten Mel Furness. He couldn't know the meaning of love either, but there was savage animal desire, and the comfort of her presence. It was natural for a man to want a woman, and a lovely woman.

He kept his arm around her as they walked into the house. Furness had done well with the interior of the stone veneer house his grandfather had thrown up overlooking the Frio; his mother had furnished it with excellent taste and Mel had added expensive luxuries, soft deep rugs and costly lamps.

Leila had never seen it before, and the unexpected magnificence took her breath away for a moment.

"This is yours, honey," Furness said tenderly. "You can have anything you want for it."

He stepped outside and called one of the riders and sent him into Cotulla for the preacher and a license. He sent other riders out over the valley. The Dudleys must come, and the Jobe Carsons and the Martin Manns.

Then he stepped back into the kitchen, roused the sleepy-eyed Mexican housekeeper and ordered a midnight feast prepared. He brought out bottles of whiskey and set them on the round oak table in the living room.

Leila sat watching with calm unexcited eyes.

Furness came back to sit by her on the wide soft divan and took a cigar from the brass humidor and lit it with a smile of appreciation for the bigness of her, the softness of her complexion, the fullness of her high firm breasts.

Then, a practical man, too, he began to talk to her of practical things.

"Where's Randall?" he asked.

"Rode over to see Helen Barker," Leila explained. There may have been some bitterness in her voice; after all she was not used to men preferring another.

"He's sweet on that half-breed, isn't he?"

"Very sweet," Leila agreed.

Mel studied her complacent face as he puffed on his cigar. "Guess Steve comes to Randall for his grub?" he ventured, proud of himself for his casualness.

Leila was unhesitant with her answer. She was loyal to the men she lived with and that loyalty changed with her men.

"Yes," she answered immediately.

Furness studied the tip of his cigar. "You wouldn't know where Barker is hiding, would you?"

"Around the spring back of Gold Gulch," she said.

Furness almost choked on his cigar. Damn him for an ignorant nester for not thinking of the Gold Gulch spring before. Once a prospector had panned gold there, an old man who had been slightly crazy and nobody had bothered him. But the old prospector had loved kids, and he and Dave Randall and Steve Barker and all the kids in the country had gone there to visit old Cleve, to watch him pore through the sands of Gold Gulch for gold dust that he never found. The prospector had been gone from Gold Gulch a long time. Naturally Steve Barker would put up there.

He thought swiftly. They could encircle Gold Gulch, some of them come up the canyon, others come down the sides. Steve Barker could not possibly escape their dragnet.

But tonight there was a wedding, and the manhunt could be put off until morning. From the kitchen came the satisfying aroma of fresh barbecue. Mel took another drink and sighed in satisfaction. Here came a buckboard clattering up in answer to his invitation—the Phil Dudleys. Mel smiled gloatingly at Phil as they shook hands. Dudley had wanted this woman, too.

The Carsons came, the Manns an hour later, and Furness in a sudden burst of generosity opened up more whiskey and invited the boys from the bunkhouse.

Apart from the women, he told the men about Barker. Carson and Mann held off; they had a cattle run on and, besides Furness had enough men. Mel nodded. He was a little glad to have a lone hand in trapping Barker.

The preacher rode up and the ceremony was held in the huge living room with neighbors and riders watching enviously from the shadows. Leila was marrying into a beautiful home, and Mel Furness was marrying a beautiful woman.

Meanwhile Dave Randall rode back from the Barker section and found the house empty, a trail of discarded personal effects from front door to back.

He tried to figure it out. Had she suddenly realized that an unmarried couple had no business living together, that people would soon start talking? Or was she mad at him about something and doing this to show her disapproval?

He did not waste much thought on the promblem of Leila's absence. During his ride back from the Barkers, where the Indian woman and Helen had protested again, calmly now since the first shock of tragedy was over, that neither Steve nor Tobe had shot Mel's cattle with the .22, or taken Ed Mansfield's life with an ambush by darkness, he had been thinking hard.

While with the Rangers, Dave had learned to rely upon strange unexplained hunches which came to him like a bolt out of the blue. He had solved at least two puzzling cases with those mysterious hunches.

He had such a hunch now about the murder of Ed Mansfield—and the .22 caliber rifle!

VII

THERE were six Rio Grande riders together with Phil Dudley and Furness. As soon as they reached the Frio, and the mouth of Gold Gulch, Mel split them into three groups. Two groups of three riders each pushed their protesting horses up the steep sides of the valley and reached the top of the rim. They were ordered to come the sides of Gold Gulch, to leave their mounts on the plateau and scramble down from tree to tree, rifles ready to fire if Steve Barker attempted to slip through.

Dudley and Furness rode directly into the gulch. Furness hummed a tune as he pushed his sorrel mare up the tiny brooklet made by the all-weather spring. Behind him he had left a lovely bride who was making herself at home in the new luxury as if she had been used to it all of her life, and the heavy-set dark-eyed man could not help but sing. Already he was planning what he would do with the Barker section. Where Steve was dead, the women would be willing to sell . . . either they could sell or they would be driven off. Mansfield was dead and only Dudley and Randall remained to share the rich valley with Rio Grande stock. Randall would be the next to go.

As they rode on single file, Phil Dudley thought about his own part in this affair with growing uneasiness. Phil was becoming conscious that he was nothing more than a hired hand for the Rio Grande, that Furness paid him out of the profits, even taking from him the right to sell and buy his own cattle. It had been easy to drift into such an arrangement; Furness was so damned competent. It had been easy to believe Mel's harsh declaration that the valley belonged to them and they would fight off everyone else.

But Phil Dudley was not a harsh man at heart. He was even a soft man, fond of easy living, weak in his loyalties and his ambitions. Always, afterward, he was ashamed of those weaknesses. He was ashamed now that he had ever thought of leaving his wife for Leila and he was glad that Furness had finally married her, that she was longer unwed to bother him. Right now he wanted nothing more than to be free of the Furness influence, to spend more time around his own home instead of riding hell-for-leather over the valley.

Furness rode ahead, silent and forbidding. They could see the riders on the rim climbing from their horses and starting down the walls of the gulch on foot. Not a sound except that of their own progress broke the mid-morning stillness. The sun climbing over the rock sides was hot, but they were inured to heat. Furness stepped from his horse and went forward with slow steps, gun out. He waved to Phil to follow him.

Suddenly Furness stopped and pointed ahead. Dudley came abreast and gasped.

Yonder, in a cup-shaped depression as large as a small corral, stood Barker's horse. There was a dead fire in the middle of the depression and Steve's saddle gear. Steve lay beside a log, sound asleep, his hat pulled over his head.

A trio of the Rio Grande boys were now through the brush and coming forward, stealthily, guns out. The five of them crept closer to the loose-sprawled shape of the sleeping man. Still Steve did not stir.

Finally Furness stood over him. The stock man let his gun and arm drop and on his face lay shadows darker than the rocks around him, and as hard. He drew back his foot and kicked Steve heavily in the ribs.

The half-breed leaped to his feet and grabbed for the rifle at his side, but Furness, with a cruel smile, stomped on his fingers. Steve looked up and around him with a slow smile of comprehension. The other riders had joined them, and ready guns covered him while Furness glared at him triumphantly. Phil looked away.

Steve's black hair dropped down his forehead, a flash of wildness raced across his dark whiskered cheeks, and went away. He looked up at Furness and nodded calmly.

"You got me," he muttered.

"Damn you, of course we've got you," snarled Furness.

Steve rose slowly to his feet, staring from one face to the other. "Well, I'm ready when you are," he said finally. "Let me saddle my horse."

Mel Furness shook his massive head. "You aren't going into Cotulla, Barker," he growled. "I don't trust another jury with you."

"No? What are you going to do?"

Furness to one of the riders. "Get his rope," he barked. "We'll hang the damned half breed with his own rope."

Steve said nothing, but the lines of his mouth tightened and his eyes were black pools of hatred. Phil thrust himself forward.

"Listen, Furness, that is going too far. We'll take him into the sheriff and let the law take its course."

"We're the law in Con-Can valley, Phil," Furness answered evenly. "We're the law and this damned breed has to answer to us. He killed Mansfield, didn't he? And his old man shot down two of my boys last night."

The rider returned with Steve's rope. Furness hooked it over one arm, keeping his gun free; he looked upward at the locust trees a moment, then back to Steve.

"Better get on your horse, Barker."

Phil came closer. "No, by God, you don't!" avowed Phil. "If you want to take him into Cotulla, all right. But nothing else."

Mel's eyes flashed. He moved in, butted the point of his shoulder into Phil's chest, sending the latter violently backward. "Keep still. If you have no guts you ought to have stayed at home."

As Phil fell he threw up his gun hand. As quick as flash the six Rio riders turned their weapons on him. Steve took advantage of the commotion to make a spring, but Furness was too quick. With one blow of his gun butt he felled the half-breed. It was not a solid blow and Steve was unharmed, only knocked to the ground. Mel stepped forward and seized Dudley's gun, stuck it into his belt.

Then he looked back to Barker. "Get on your horse," he growled.

Steve shook his head slowly without saying a word.

Furness stared at him in anger. "Damn you, get on your horse," he ordered, a shrill note in his voice.

Still Steve didn't move. Furness threw up his gun. His chin came up with the motion and he fired three times, shoving the gun toward his target as though he could not get it done quickly enough. Shocked speechless, Phil saw Mel's lips pull back at each shot, saw his face snap into grotesque expressions of insanity such as he had never seen before on a man's face. Steve bowed his head and bent his knees as though to kneel. Then he fell forward.

Furness walked toward him, and looked down at his dying motions with a cold disdainful sneer, the craziness gone from his face and suddenly cold and matter-of-fact again.

He nodded to two of the riders. "Take him down to the Barker fence and dump him inside," he ordered. "Yell so the women can come from the house and get him."

Then he holstered his gun and looked back at Phil.

DUDLEY was still shocked, still in a horrible dream. Phil had seen men hung, seen men shot down in open battle, but for one man to stand over another and send three bullets thudding into his helpless chest . . . that was too harsh for even this stark, harsh country. Phil Dudley said so. After all, he was a man. Perhaps he was a weak man willing to follow a strong leader, but he had lived his lifetime in a country where a man had to have some qualities of strength and character to exist at all, and those qualities now rose to the surface, leaving him suddenly as hard and as crisp of speech as his boss, and as unafraid of the odds against him as any man could have been.

"I think you've overplayed your hand," he said softly.

"Think so?" Mel growled. "Stick around and see, Dudley. I've told you before who was running this valley."

Phil stepped forward and took his gun. He held it in his hand a moment, his fingers caressing the barrel. The Rio Grande riders watched him anxiously. They knew men in such a mood even if Furness was too blind and too sure of himself to realize the danger. Phil was thinking, and they knew what he was thinking about. They knew, also, that the odds against him had nothing to do with the nature of his thoughts. He was not considering at all that if he drew on Furness that six different guns would blaze certain death toward him. His problem was to decide whether to kill Furness or not, and the certainty of his own death if he decided in the affirmative had nothing to do with it.

He decided not to kill, not from cowardice, not from lack of sudden hatred, but because it was not his fight, because, of a sudden, a different thought leaped into his brain.

He expressed thought as he pushed his gun into his holster.

"I'd hate to be in your shoes, Furness," he murmured. "I'd hate to have Dave Randall after me."

"I'm not afraid of Randall," Furness growled. "Let him come after me. He's another we have to get rid of sooner or later."

Phil looked at him with an even fearless gaze. "So am I, Furness," he said crisply. "When I ride over that hill, I'm your enemy from then on. If you're smart you'll shoot me in the back and lay it on to Steve Barker."

Phil mounted his horse, touched spurs to flanks, and rode away at a canter. He would not even give Furness the satisfaction of seeing him gallop away, or if veering his horse to upset the aim of any gun which might be trained upon him.

None were directed toward him. The six gunmen watched him nervously, and any of them, or all of them, would have obeyed a command from their foreman. But Furnes gave no such command. He could not believe Dudley was that important. He repeated his orders to dump Steve's lifeless body inside the Barker fence and rode off alone.

Phil waited until he was out of sight to break his horse into a gallop. Actually he was in a great hurry, but he would not give them the satisfaction of thinking he was taking flight. He flicked his horse with spurs once in the valley's even stretch and galloped toward the road leading up the sides of the rim, to the cottage perched on the loftiest crag.

He was disappointed to learn from Ike that Dave had ridden off that morning.

"Saw him down the valley awhile ago," said Ike, "and he looked like he was riding toward the Rio Grande. At least, he didn't turn off to go to the Barkers and that's usually where he goes when he takes off like a sage hen without a word to anybody." Phil turned his horse back down the rim. Far below him he saw a lone rider leaving the valley and turning up the cliffs. That would be Dave, and again he spurred his horse into a gallop. Rider and horse catapaulted down the steep incline at a precarious pace, and it was a wonder the mare didn't lose her footing and send Phil tumbling off down the incline. Dave saw him coming and pulled up to wait for him.

"Randall!" cried Phil as soon as he thought he could be heard.

"Where's the fire?" Dave asked. Somehow he could not hate Phil Dudley.

"Steve, Dave," Phil panted, pulling his excited horse to a stop. "Furness got him. Shot him right down when Steve didn't have a chance."

The corners of Dave's mouth tightened but that was all.

"When?" he asked quietly.

"An hour ago maybe, not long."

Dave looked off over the Con-Can Valley his lips twitching. For a long moment he looked in silence, then he said softly:

"Steve didn't kill Mansfield, Dudley, Furness did."

"Furness! But the .22—!"

"Furness owns a .22," Dave said in that same slow toneless voice. "Furness shot his own cattle and planted them in the Barker pasture."

Phil Dudley was shocked again. He had been so certain of the half-breed's guilt, so lustful for revenge against the Barkers when the body of his friend had been found near the Barker fence, dropped by a .22 caliber bullet. He took off his hat and wiped his head with his handkerchief. It did not occur to him to doubt Dave.

"Furness," he whispered. He, too, looked off over the valley for a moment.

"I guess I'm not surprised, Dave," he said finally. "Mansfield broke with Furness the day before. I guess Mel figured that Ed would talk."

"Talk? About what?"

"We've been working with Furness, Ed and me," Phil said uncomfortably. "Some things have been going on that wouldn't look right to some people. Furness did 'em. Ed and I just stood by and watched him, and got nothing out of it. I wouldn't be surprised but what he gypped us on our own stuff."

When Dave did not answer, Phil plunged on: "Some of it was your brother's, Dave. Furness gathered up everything in sight when we had a drive on. I expect a lot of your brother's cattle went that way."

Dave nodded. "I expect so," he said listlessly.

He continued to look off over the valley. Then, with a sudden motion, he hitched his belt, pulled his hat low and turned back in his path.

"Where are you going?" Phil cried out.

"After Furness," Dave said grimly.

"Wait for me," Phil shouted with sudden decision, and he spurred the mare until he had pulled abreast.

THE hunch had been a wild one. Dave had found himself suddenly believing Steve's protestations that no Barker had killed the Rio Grande cattle or fired upon Ed Mansfield. But somebody had, somebody who owned a .22 caliber rifle. Putting two and two together, Steve had made a wild guess as to who else would have a .22 in the valley. It would be someone who had purchased it with malice in mind, intending to kill cattle or men and throw the blame upon Steve and Tobe. That would be Furness, of course.

Dave had ridden openly to the Rio Grande headquarters. Leila came out to meet him, offering no explanations except that she had married Furness the night before. She had welcomed him with the casual hospitality of the cattle country, even asking him in for coffee. Dave had not accepted.

But he had gone inside. He had looked around at the magnificence of the furniture and the rugs and shown a begrudging admiration for Mel's taste. Then he had wandered into Furness' office. He saw no gun which was even near a .22 caliber.

At last, in desperation, he had tried another ruse. He had gone to the bunk house and there talked to the cook, a Mexican who remembered him from his boyhood days and greeted him warmly. Then two riders drifted in for an early lunch. They regarded him stonily but offered no protest against his presence.

Dave ate with them. Suddenly he

reached down and came up with an empty shell in his hand.

"God, a .22!" he exclaimed. "What are you boys going in for—popguns!"

The expression on their faces were a dead giveaway. They looked at him in sudden dismay, and then at each other. Dave knew how to put on a poker-face—what Rangers don't! He returned to his food, tossing the shell into the corner of the room, and did not mention it again. After a moment the two riders relaxed. But he had found out enough.

He studied them closely as he ate. One was called Kippie Young, and Dave knew of him as a good rider, good shot and a pretty tough character. He could no nothing with Kippie. The other was named Puny Scott, and Dave decided that Puny was his man.

When Puny started off, saying he had to ride the north fence, Dave stretched and said carelessly:

"Going that way myself. I'll ride with you."

A mile from the ranchhouse Dave wheeled his horse in front of Puny's.

"This is far enough," he growled. "Reach for your gun, Scott. I'll give you a chance and that's more than you gave Mansfield."

Stark terror showed on Puny's face.

"I didn't have anything to do with killing Mansfield. Honest I didn't."

Dave drew his gun. "Mansfield was a friend of mine," he snapped. "So was Tobe Barker. I'm going to get every man that had a part in their death."

"But not me, Randall! I swear I had nothing to do with it. I wasn't even with the boys when they went after Mansfield. Nobody but the boss and Cultus Charlie ever used that gun."

Dave fingered his gun with restless fingers. "If you'll talk like that to the sheriff," he said slowly, "I'll let you go."

"I'll talk to anybody," Scott promised, cold beads of perspiration covering his forehead. "Anybody. I ain't done nothing."

And to the bewildered sheriff, Puny Scott told the entire story. Rio men had killed their own cattle inside the Barker fence to throw suspicion on Steve, Furness using the .22 caliber gun he had recently ordered. Then, when Mansfield quarreled with their manager, Mel and Cultus Charlie made plans to kill him.

Why? Mansfield came over to see Furness and demanded they return to the Randall ranch all of the cattle, or the cash equivalent, they had run off. And Mansfield was openly accusing Furness of gyping him and Dudley on the cattle deals.

Dave, listening closely with his mouth twitching, interrupted at this point:

"Mansfield, I take it, wasn't killed at the Barker fence?"

"I don't think so," Puny hesitated. "I don't know exactly when or where he was killed. I just heard talk. The boys say he was killed at the ranchhouse and carried down to the fence."

"I gathered that impression from the position of the body," Dave told the sheriff. "I was pretty sure then that neither Steve nor Tobe had killed him."

Puny Scott completed his story and the sheriff looked at Dave helplessly.

"What can I do?" demanded the sheriff. "I can't raise a posse to fight the Rio Grande crew."

Dave looked away thoughtfully. He had sworn to uphold the due course of the law, but perhaps it was true that sometimes sheriffs and posses came to a country too soon, that sometimes a range had to take law in its own hands, establish order first, and then let the regular law maintain it.

"We'll take care of our own valley, sheriff," he said harshly.

Then to Puny Scott: "Don't be here tomorrow, Scott," he ordered.

The Rio rider looked up and nodded.

Dave was riding toward the rim road when Phil Dudley met him.

At the bottom of the rim they heard a shout behind them and up rode Joe Vance and the nester, Hugh Sheffield. The big youngster was beaming from ear to ear.

"I did it, Dave!" he shouted. "She married me."

Sheffield's worn weather-beaten face looked almost as happy. Dave and Phil extended congratulations, then pleaded the urgency of their business and started to ride on. Joe Vance stopped them and patted the rifle scabbard on his saddle.

"Pop and me figured that," he said with a grin. "We've been watching things from back on the rim. We're with you, Dave"

Dave shook his head. "It's my fight, Joe," he said firmly.

"Mine, too," claimed Joe. "My stuff comes right up against this valley. If Furness sweeps you under, I'll be next on his list. It's smart for me to help stop him where he is."

Dave agreed to that, but reluctantly. Then he turned to Sheffield and cautioned the homesteader against coming along.

"This isn't your business, Sheffield."

Sheffield didn't smile. He was past the point of finding amusement in the world, but in his eyes was a light like the last glow of coals of a dying fire. He patted his old buffalo gun as he answered.

"It's my fight, too," he claimed. "For a long time I've been running from range wars, Mister Randall. Everywhere I've gone ranch outfits have smoked me out and sent me running over the hill. I had to tuck my tail and beat it because I didn't have a chance against them, me by myself. But you and Joe gave me a chance to build a cabin in peace and raise me a patch of vegetables. If you lose out, they'll come after me again, and burn me out again, and manhandle my daughter. I'm tired of running. You're a young man, Mister Randall, and you don't know how I feel. You ain't ever watched your wife or your kids cringe when a shot comes whinnin' around the house. You ain't seen your wife look into an empty breadbox. You ain't ever had another man slap you down in front of your own family and you were afraid to hit him back. I reckon I feel hotter about this war than you do."

Dave touched his spurs to his horse and turned off without answering. The old man rummaged through his pockets until he found corncob pipe and tobacco; he filled and lit it while swaying in the unfamiliar saddle; but when his hands brushed against the rusty gun his eyes lit up again, and he clutched at the saddle horn as Dave broke into a gallop and he found himself hard-put to stay on his horse.

THERE came more re-enforcements. Shouts behind them, clatter of flying horses, and up swept Ike and Jackrabbit. Old Ike's gnarled face was aflame with indignation.

"What in the tarnation is this?" he demanded of his employer. "Don't we ever get dealt in on the fun?"

"Come on," Dave said curtly. "We don't want darkness to catch us."

They clattered across the valley and began to ascend the opposite side of the rim. The sun was fading until its tentacles were touching the bluff tops, but there would be time, and light.

Only Furness and his crew were gone. They were riding the north fence, the startled Mexican told them. Somebody had reported a break and they were rounding up the stock in that pasture. Dave headed north.

VIII

THE hackberries and cedars were barely distinguished shapes as the sun dropped fast in the upper valley. Dave and his followers stopped to water their horses and to drink themselves. Ironically enough, they stopped at the same spring where Steve Barker had died.

Then, way ahead of them, they could see the glow of Mel's campfire.

Dave issued orders. "Spread out," he said. "We go in shooting."

They wafted a shot or two, high and out of range, to let the varmints know they were coming. Then their horses were moving slowly through a night whose thick haze smothered everything. The campfire showed a round dull spot of red. Dave lifted his rifle and fired at the campfire to let Furness know they meant business.

Suddenly Sheffield's buffalo gun began to boom out its massive echoes and Dave smiled approvingly. The old homesteader was a good man in a fight. Dave touched spurs to his horse and raced in. A dim shape was visible stamping out the embers. Sheffield's gun boomed from behind him, and there was a flash of fire from his right and a hoarse yell from Rusty Ike, and the dim shape went reeling.

"There's one of the varmints," shouted Ike.

Dave waited for a more definite target. Flashes of gunfire came from behind the campfire, from the high buff beyond. Rio men were scrambling up its side. There were cattle in the depression by the spring and these gave bawls of fright and started lumbering away in the brush. One of

Furness' riders hurried out of the darkness and Dave felt, rather than heard, a shot explode in his face. It was a bold attempt, but the rider paid for it with his life. Phil Dudley downed his horse with a well-placed shot; then, as the gunman leaped from the saddle, Dave swept up his rifle and dropped him with a single bullet. A horse brushed against him riderless and confused; he recognized Ike's mount and looked around for signs of the old warrior.

"Ike, Ike!" he shouted.

"Go on," a hoarse voice yelled back. "I'm just winged."

They pushed up the slope, scuffling against the rocks, tearing their clothes on the brush. Ahead of them were other scuffling sounds. The shadows made everybody reckless, the shadows covered everything, and Sheffield's heavy gun boomed out at clocklike intervals. Dave smiled. Probably the homesteader wasn't hitting anything but he was sure a scrapper.

They had spread out now going up the slope which in spots was steep enough that they had to fall on their hands and knees. Rifle-fire came from the high ground, but it was downhill and the range was uncertain. Furness and his hired killers did little damage. But, hidden behind trees and rocks, they had the advantage.

Dave called a halt and they talked in low tones. They crawled off to obey his commands. This was a fight and he was their leader. That some of them might not live through this fight worried none of them, only Sheffield had ever worried about death.

They spread wide, so far apart that they could not always see each other. They veered to the side of Furness' position among the rocks and trees and flitted from cover to cover, not bothering to fire, seeking to reach the high ground before opening their barrage. Shots tore around them in the brush but their elusive bobbing shapes were hard to hit. They reached the rim and were lost among the trees. There was no shock from this urgent running now, so deep was the cushioning layer of humus. They spread out even farther. They wanted this to be the finish fight. They didn't want a man to get away.

It seemed like long hours before they sighted the first of Furness' men. Dave had filtered farther through the undergrowth than any. He heard a rustle behind him, dropped to his face and peered from behind a pine trunk and saw one of the gunmen reclining behind a boulder. He fired hastily, then rolled over to prevent a bullet from thudding into him as he lay on the ground. He heard his bullet strike flesh, heard a groan.

He heard a burst of gunfire from behind him and caught a glimpse of Phil slithering through the trees. He sighed. Phil was an unexpected ally, and unexpectedly a good one. The foppish ranchman seemed to be a calm fighter, and a sure one.

Then a rattle of gunfire from his left told him that Sheffield and his new son-in-law had reached the top of the rim, also, and were fighting side by side. Dave crawled forward slowly, being careful to keep himself covered. Now he came to his feet and made a run for a low clump of straggly cedar. He fired at a fleeting shape but knew he would miss the moment he raised his gun to his shoulder.

Then he saw two men on horseback in the distant cedars and he dropped to his knees and began to blaze away. His fourth shot dropped one from the saddle; he tumbled forward and the horse drew up after a few more steps and looked down at his rider with a queer look, as if this was too much for a horse to understand. The other rider threw his horse behind the partial shelter of a scraggly cedar a hundred yards away. Dave sent the rest of his shells crashing into the cedar limbs and then lay still in the brush and re-loaded. He saw the cedar boughs part and a head emerge cautiously while he jammed shells into his magazine.

In the split second before Dave could jam home his shells, the head bobbed back. Randall swore. It was Mel Furness.

He had located his man. These others would fight, but it was a battle primarily between him and Furness. He burned his fingers in his haste to get his gun loaded.

The head showed no more, but the horse presented a partial target. Dave fired and the animal screamed in pain and leaped out from behind the tree, immune to the spurs and quirt which Furness used desperately to get the wounded animal under control. Whirling and pitching, the horse crashed through brush and collided against trees. Dave fired again and again but the bobbing shape of the man fighting in the saddle was too poor a target; none of them crashed home.

Finally Furness despaired of bringing the horse under control again and left the saddle in a desperate leap. Again Dave winged a quick shot toward him, but the broad-shouldered man rolled over and over and reached the safety of the brush, carrying his rifle with him. Dave gave a shout of triumph and raced forward.

It was a fatal error—almost. Furness was a cool-headed fighter. A glance backward told him that Dave was tearing toward him, rifle high. He rolled on his back and threw up his gun and two quick shots crashed through the cedar near the ex-Ranger.

Randall fell forward, cursing himself for being a damned fool. Quick as he was, he could not avoid a shell which struck him in the left shoulder and brought a deadening paralyzing pain as well as a flow of blood. The other bullet narrowly missed his ear.

BEHIND them the fighting had ceased. Some of the Rio riders had galloped away, some had simply thrown down their arms. They were neither resentful nor distressed. They had been hired to ride and fight, and they had fought until their leader had clambered up the rim and out of the battle. Now they were ready to quit fighting, at least for this foreman.

Phil and Jackrabbit and Sheffield and Joe Vance watched Mel's flight from the rim. They made no move to interfere. It was right that this fight should terminate into a man-for-man struggle.

Mel turned occasionally, and once one of his bullets thudded into a limb over Dave's head so close that for a moment Randall thought he was actually hit.

Mel had a lead of a hundred yards and that was a long distance in the brush; Dave could see his bobbing shape often but never long enough for a shot even if there had not been straggling brush in between, enough to throw a bullet out of line. Mel wisely headed down the slope, knowing a downhill shot is the hardest to make.

From the rim top the boys could see that Dave had a tough fight on his hands.

The brush cover was growing thinner. Furness had to make a long run from a cedar clump to a fallen log and in that run he presented his broad shoulders to the rifleman above him for a fleeting second and Dave let go with everything he had—one shot after another. He shot out his magazine. He was certain he had winged the big man. No movement came from behind the log. Dave pumped more shells into his magazine and wriggled forward.

Not ten yards behind Furness was the foot of the rim and the open prairie. This, then, was Mel's chosen showdown spot.

Dave studied the terrain. There was no way he could wriggle to one side or back of the log without exposing himself, and a crashing shot that tore into the sage just above him warned him that Furness was still very much alive and very much on the alert. He had to come forward right into the face of that threatening fire.

Taking advantage of every tree trunk, boulder and bit of brush he wriggled closer and closer. Another shot narrowly missed him and he flattened himself against the ground. He could see fleeting glimpses of Mel's clothes but never a target.

He veered in a circle, ever coming closer. More shots tore through the undergrowth around him. One brought a sudden pain in his side and for a terrible second he thought Furness had downed him, then he realized it was only a scratch and kept going. He climbed atop a flat boulder and pumped shots down on the log. Scraps of bark flew off its top, but still Furness kept hidden. The angle wasn't quite great enough; Dave squirmed away from the rock and came closer.

Furness watched him with hawk-like eyes. He did not despair of the situation. Others had excelled him in physical qualities in this raw land, but he had always come out on top. He waited now for Randall to come closer, a smile on his full lips. He had an idea he could out-smart the lean man wriggling through the brush, now almost upon him. Mel scraped off a piece of bark and watched, his eye glued to the top of the log and no part of him visible. Let Randall come close. Let Randall get right on top of him. Let Randall get so close that one quick shot from either would settle it.

Mel Furness intended to get that shot.

Now he could place Randall by the sounds of his crawl through the undergrowth and on the rocky hillside. Furness gripped his rifle tightly and waited cunningly. He was smarter than these rawboned, clear-eyed men.

Closer Dave Randall crept. Furness could hear him breathing. Another moment and . . . he peered through the stripped bark. *Now!*

Furness leaped upward and fired pointblank at Dave in the same motion, gambling his life upon this surprise move, upon getting the first shot. Dave's rifle was in his hand but not against his shoulder; Furness could shoot as he raised up, and if he hit with that quick desperate shot, it was over.

He did hit. Burning hell struck Dave's thigh. But Dave didn't collapse, nor did his hand waver as he lifted his rifle. Quickly Mel pumped another shot at the prostrate man, but now Mel shot too fast, and the bullet thudded into the rocks at Dave's side and went skimming out into open space with a screeching wail. Upon this Mel Furness had gambled—that Dave Randall would go down. But Randall stood up—and Mel was lost.

A third time Mel's rifle barked, but this time the shot went thudding high into the trees. For, in the split second interim, had blazed another rifle, Dave's gun, and the target had been there too big and bold for any man to miss, and the impact pushed Mel backward so that his rifle was aimed far too high. Then he lost his footing and fell, caroming over the log. As he spun around, Dave fired again. Furness rolled off the log with a gentle thud and lay on his face with arms outstretched. For a moment his fingers twitched; then they, too, were still.

Dave felt suddenly faint. He sat down on the ground and tried to roll a cigarette, but the paper and tobacco sack slipped from his fingers to the ground. He lay on top of them in another moment, the blood dripping from his shirt staining the proverbial sack of Bull Durham.

But when Joe and Sheffield and Phil raced down the hill to his side he was still conscious, and could give them a weak grin.

Quickly Phil bandaged his wounds, tearing his silken shirt to shreds to make bandage packs. He was adept at this, with quick nimble fingers. None of Dave's wounds were serious and he could mount his horse and ride slowly back toward the Con-Can Valley, and the winding steep road leading to its bottom. It was a slow ride, for he must hold his horse to a walk and they stayed with him, Jackrabbit helping to hold him up.

At the top of the valley Hugh Sheffield and Joe Vance turned off. "We'll leave you gents here," Joe said gruffly.

"Thanks, boys," Dave said weakly. "Thanks a lot."

Sheffield spoke. "Proud to have been with you, Mister Randall," he said. "Proud to have been in a fight like that."

He hitched his belt and patted his buffalo rifle and a smile touched his worn weather-beaten face. "I guess now everybody knows how Hugh Sheffield stands," he said gruffly. "That little shack and the land around it will be prettier now that I've fought for it. And you men who are going to live around me . . . now you know Hugh Sheffield is proud to help you when you're right, and will do his damnest to shoot the living daylight out of you when you're wrong."

And with that the weather-beaten nester rode away with his son-in-law, some of the stoop gone from his long body, and the hang-dog look entirely absent from his wrinkled face.

They halted at the next cross-trail at Dave's command. At the foot of this winding road lay the Barker house, and Dave could see Helen among the trees. He waved and she started running forward.

"I guess I can make it from here, boys," Dave said weakly. "Thanks again."

Helen reached him, and, with a cry of alarm, helped him from the saddle. He swayed dizzily, and leaned heavily upon her for support.

"Just a flesh wound," he mumbled. "Be all right soon."

But he tottered and would have fallen had she not held him up. The Indian woman came out, and the two of them half-lifted, half-pushed him into the rock house and the cool comfort of a bed. Helen moved to replace the crude blood-soaked bandages Phil had tied, and pushed aside her mother when the Indian woman tried to take charge. This was *her* place. This was her moment.

Pin-up picture for the man who "can't afford" to buy an extra War Bond!

YOU'VE HEARD PEOPLE SAY: "I can't afford to buy an extra War Bond." Perhaps you've said it yourself . . . without realizing what a ridiculous thing it is to say to men who are dying.

Yet it *is* ridiculous, when you think about it. Because today, with national income at an all-time record high . . . with people making more money than ever before . . . with less and less of things to spend money for . . . practically every one of us has extra dollars in his pocket.

The very *least* that *you* can do is to buy an *extra* $100 War Bond . . . above and beyond the Bonds you are now buying or had planned to buy. In fact, if you take stock of your resources, you will probably find that you can buy an *extra* $200 . . . or $300 . . . or even $500 worth of War Bonds.

Sounds like more than you "can afford?" Well, young soldiers can't afford to die, either . . . yet they do it when called upon. So is it too much to ask of us that we invest more of our money in War Bonds . . . the best investment in the world today? Is that too much to ask?

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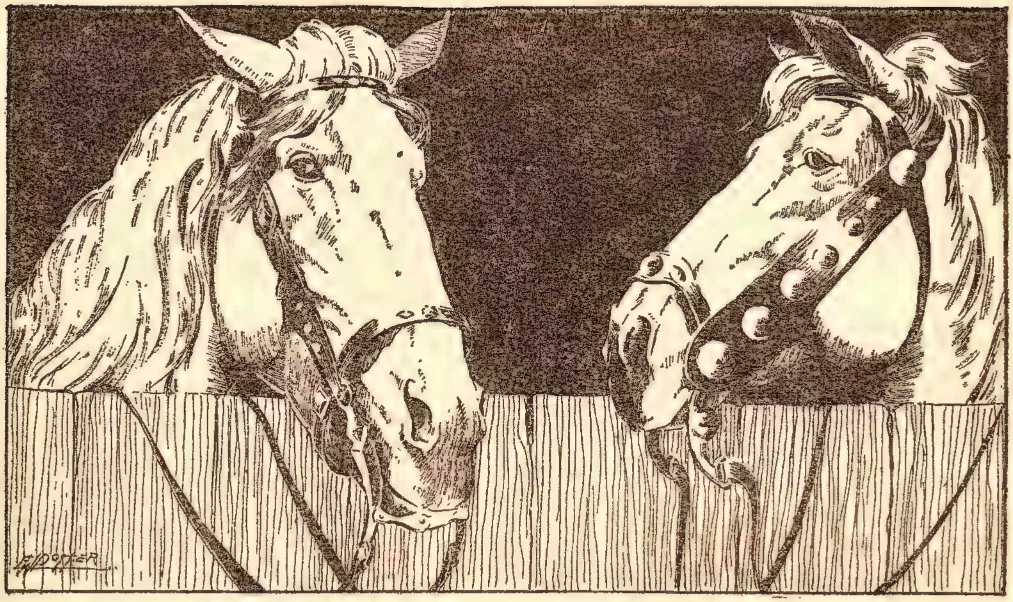

HORSES

SAY, Stranger, excuse me f'r buttin' in, but I thought I heard you say
That horses was now plum outa date an' sorta in the way.
"Outlived their usefulness," you said, "an' cost too much t' keep,"
An' "you think they ought t' be all killed off t' leave more feed for sheep."
You say, "machines c'n do their work much better, an' cheaper, too,"
An' that'd sure cut a lot of ice with a dam cheap skate like you.

Oh, you needn't swell up an' git on the prod, I didn't mean no offense,
But it riled me up some t' hear you say that horses ain't got no sense.
You know a hell of a lot, I guess, 'bout how t' make things pay,
But, Pardner, you don't know horses now, 'r you wouldn't talk that way.
These poor plugs draggin' peddlers' carts, you've seen *that* kind, of course,
But I wouldn't mind bettin' you six months' pay that you never saw a *horse.*

If you've ever seen a good cow horse a cuttin' out spooky steers.
You c'd learn a lot that you don't know now jest watchin' that pony's ears.
If you seen him matchin' 'em jump f'r jump, till he got 'em outside th' herd.
With his rider lettin' the reins hang loose, an' never sayin' a word,
An' come prancin' back a tossin' his head like he's havin' a heap o' fun,
An' his ears a-sayin', "Pard, that's fine, let's git another one."

If you seen him outfigger 'em every time, when they'd dodge 'r jest stop an' balk
You wouldn't say he didn't have brains, an' sense enough t' talk.
Sure, horses c'n talk as well as men, tho' their language ain't the same,
An' they don't run off at the face a lot, like some *folks* I c'd name.
But they c'n tell you a lot o' things if you savvy what they mean,
An' a wise little horse is a better pard than a lot of them I've seen.

When you are ridin' the range alone an' campin' out at night,
An' settin' over a sage brush fire that don't give too much light
A watchin' them twinklin' little lights off yonder in the dark;
Sometimes as big as a critter's eyes an' sometimes jest a spark;
A breathin' the cool damp smell o' sage, jest sorta *drinkin'* air
An' listenin' to all them little sounds way off in the shadows there.

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Horses

You can't see nothin' beyond the fire, f'r the stars ain't very bright,
But you hear the chirp o' some kind of bird a-tellin' hisself good night.
An' a coyote barkin', lonesome like, away out on the hill
An' your pony grazin' close to camp, an' it's all so kinda still.
You c'n hear a little rustlin' wind, so faint it's like a sigh;
An' the kinda flutterin' rush of wings of some night bird flittin' by.

An' jest out there in the dark apiece, a sudden startled squeal,
Like one o' them funny little owls has ketched hisself a meal.
An' your pony comes pokin' in close t' you, an' nickers low an' clear,
An' sticks his nose down against your cheek, an' sorta nibbles y'r ear;
You know he's a talkin' to you then, you know what he's sayin', too;
"It's kinda lonesome out there Pard, an' I'm stickin' here with you."

An' he's standin' there when you go to bed, jest like he's sayin', "Pard,
You jest lay down an' take a sleep an' I'll stay here on guard,"
An' when you wake in the mornin', when th' sky's jest gettin' clear
The first thing you see when you look aroun' is him a grazin' near.
An' he'll nicker at you when he sees you move, jest like he's sayin', "Hello!
You better roll outa them soogans now; it's pretty near time t' go."

An' when you saddle him up an' start, an' he's sorta steppin' high,
An' lookin' 'roun' t' find him a spook t' have an excuse t' shy,
You know he wants you t' play with him, he's itchin' t' have some fun,
An' you have t' watch him an' hold him in, or he'd jest break out an' run,
An' you cuss him kinda friendly like, an' tighten up on th' bit;
An' he sorta telegraphs his ears, "All right ol' boy, I'll quit."

An' while you are ridin' through th' breaks, an' lookin' aroun' f'r steers
He'll tell you a lot of things he sees if you'll jest watch his ears.
An' when you unsaddle an' turn him loose an' he's had a chance t' roll,
An' has shook hisself, but don't start off a huntin' th' water hole,
But comes an' rubs against y'r arm an' gives his ears a twitch
He's sayin', 'Pardner, rub my ears, that head stall made 'em itch."

An' you rub his ears like he wants you to, an' scratch his under jaw,
An' he'll nibble y'r fingers a little bit, jest sorta pretend t' knaw,
He's jest a tellin' you, "Thanks, ol' boy. That sure feels mighty good,"
An' you cuss him a little an' slap his ribs, to show him you understood.
An' he'll stick aroun' while you're makin' camp; the dam' ol' biskit bum!
An' nicker an' beg till you give him one, an' you say he is dumb!

An' *you* think horses ain't no good, they're out o' date, an' slow;
An' you'd like t' see 'em all killed off, th' same as th' buffalo.
You say machines c'd take their place. That kinda talk is *bunk*.
There'll be horses, an' men t' ride 'em, too, when them dam machines is junk.
There's *some* half decent people left, so if their *work did* end
I reckon they wouldn't be *all* killed off, f'r a good horse is a *friend*.

By Jim Fisher

DEAD MAN'S DRAW

By M. HOWARD LANE

Deuce McKeon bought a wagonful of trouble when he exchanged a stack of chips for the lobo-ridden Circle L.

TROUBLE'S red banner was flying high from the border to the Dragoons, and from the Huachua to Las Animas, but Deuce McKeon didn't know that when he rode his bay mare, Chiquita, into Yuba town.

As far as towns went, he'd seen better, he decided, and a few that might be termed worse. Two years back Yuba had been a roaring silver camp with the stamp mills along the San Carlos River behind him grinding out a fortune every day and night. Outlaws and Eastern capitalists had rubbed elbows together on its boardwalks. Cowboys and muckers alike had gotten rich over night speculating on mines that had produced nothing but an abundance of sucker money.

Wild, woolly, and unwashed, Yuba town had held its brief spot in the Arizona sun, and then one of the mines on the dun hills behind the town had tapped an underground river that pumps couldn't handle. It was the story of mining, and boomtown bravos and dancehall ladies had packed their grips and departed on the next stage to Tucson. In one week Yuba had become the next thing to a ghost town.

Now it drowsed in decaying splendor with only the raucous cries of swallows nesting beneath the eaves of the once elegant opera house to remind citizens of lost glory. A general store, a half dozen saloons, one Chinese restaurant, and one combination livery and blacksmith shop was all that had kept their doors open.

Deuce looked from the lone restaurant to the six saloons, and a grin touched his lips. "Looks like folks drink more than they eat around here," he muttered.

Chiquita tossed her head, and aimed slantwise across the dusty, sixty-foot wide street. The mare was heading for a watering trough in front of the Silver Lady Saloon, if the faded sign above its door was accurate.

Deuce made no objections. He let the mare drink sparingly, for they had come a long, hot way, then he looped the reins over the hitch-rail alongside the trough. Eyes he could feel but not see had been watching him from inside the dusty windows of the Silver Lady since the moment he'd started angling across the street. Three other broncs dozed at the rail, and the brands on a pair of them at least were badly blotched.

"Looks like mebbe hoss thieves who don't give a damn hang out in the Lady," he thought, and was pleased. Horse thieves sometimes had money, and usually liked to gamble with a man who was willing to back deuces to the limit of the game.

Then McKeon took himself in hand. "You ain't come here to gamble," he told himself sternly. "And don't you be forgettin' it. You used up all your luck in Tucson when you exchanged a stack of chips for a ranch, signed, sealed and deeded to you. From now on you're going to make your dinero the hard, honest way."

He tramped across the boardwalk, spurs jingling at the heels of his boots. Red head tipped down so nobody inside would suspect that he knew he was being watched, McKeon used his old sombrero to slap some of the trail-dust from his clothes.

The watchers inside saw a tall, lathy young fellow with an innocent, freckled face. He wore one Colt in a low-slung holster, but the gun didn't look like it had been used much.

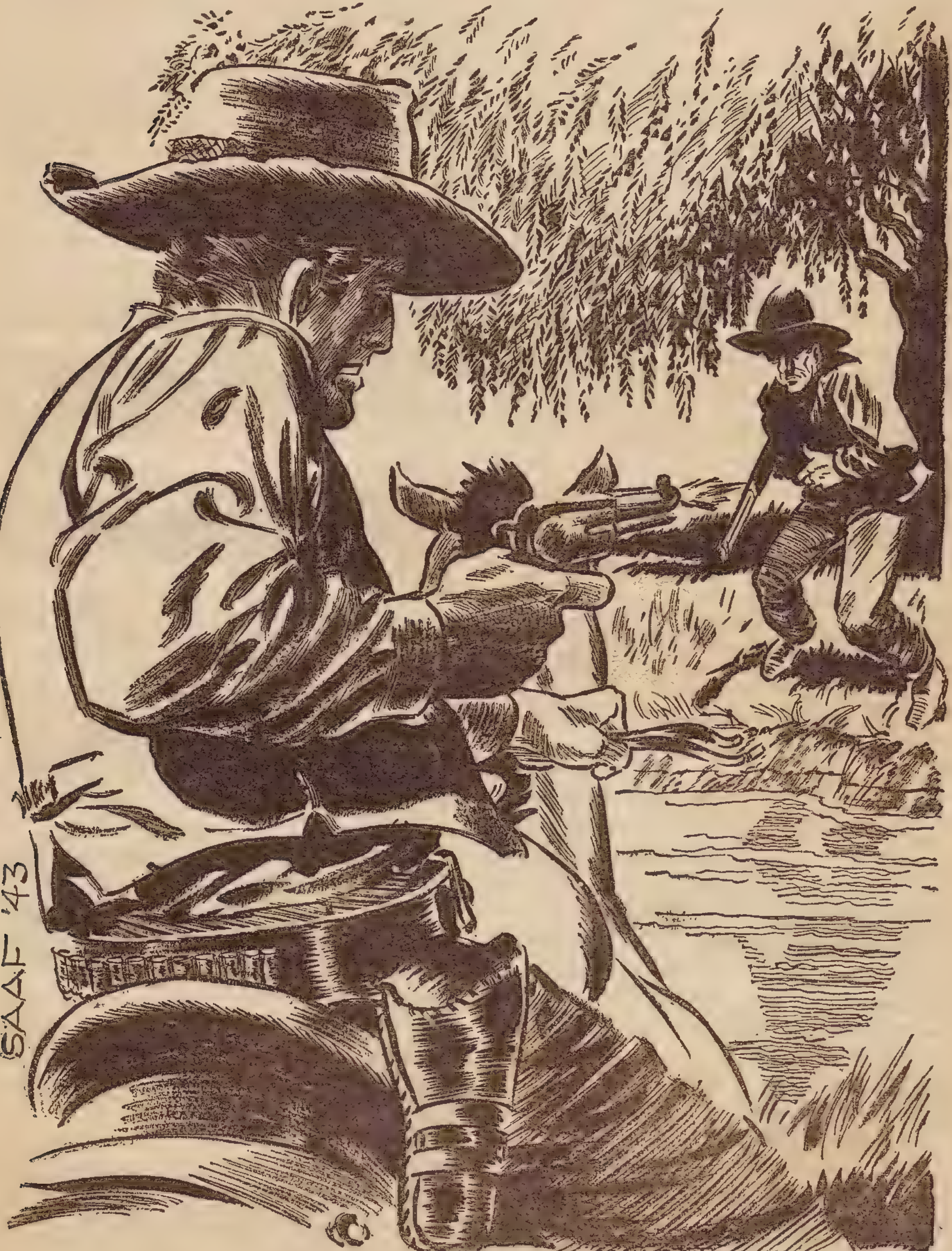
Deuce heard feet moving hastily inside the saloon as he mounted to the porch, and he hoped that they'd all decided he wasn't a deputy sheriff, or a Ranger on the loose.

He put his hat back on his head, and pushed open the batwings when all the scuffling sounds ceased inside. A swarthy, perspiring bartender swabbed the once-elegant mahogany of the Silver Lady's bar. Sawdust littered the floor, and dingy chandeliers hung from the ceiling overhead.

Even the air smelled musty with decaying elegance. But there was nothing decayed about the three men leaning at the bar. Hard-faced, double-gunned to a man, they toyed with the drinks the barkeep had set before them, and studied the stranger in the back-bar mirror as he ambled with a loose-joined gait toward the bar.

"Howdy," Deuce said amiably. "If you got cold beer, I'll take me a swallow."

The three men at the bar were keyed for trouble. Deuce had been in too much of it himself not to read the signs. He felt curiosity start to tickle like a crawling lizard along his ribs. The old gent who had promptly cashed his stack of chips had assured him solemnly that Yuba had gone back to sleep after its one brief fling.



Deuce felt the Colt bucking in his fist—and he had no mercy for the man before the gun's muzzle.

"Huachuca ranchers buy supplies there, and the cowpokes blow holes in the sky on payday. Nothin' else ever happens. You'll like that leetle spread you just bought from me. Apache Canyon is right nice country. All you'll have to do is set around and watch yore cattle grow fat. Shore am sorry to lose that hunk of range!"

But he had neither looked nor acted sorry, Deuce was thinking now as he watched the barkeep pour beer into a glass. He tasted it, and it was warm. "Good!" he said blandly. "Nothin' like cold beer after a long ride. You by any chance know whar I can find Apache Canyon?" He addressed his remarks to the bartender, but out of the corner of his eye he watched the three men along the bar stiffen as one.

The bartender licked his lips. He appeared nervous. "Apache Canyon?" he seemed to be searching carefully for his words. "Why that ain't much more'n a slit in the Smoky Hills t'wixt here and the border. Fact is, it's the straightest shoot 'tween here and Mexico, and got the only waterhole big enough to take care of stock trailin' thisaway from the Line. It belonged to an old cuss, Jim Leadbetter."

McKeon's thick brows were faded by the sun. They lifted as he murmured, "News sure travels fast. 'Pears like somebody must have brought the word that Deuce McKeon took it off his hands in a Tucson poker game."

THE nearest of the three men at the bar turned and looked at Deuce. He was a middle-sized, powerfully built individual with oily black hair that curled across his low forehead. His eyes were the same color on either side of a bulbous nose, and they were as direct as lead fired from the muzzle of a forty-five.

"You Deuce McKeon?" he asked bluntly.

Deuce nodded, and there were undercurrents here that he didn't understand. Leadbetter had said this was peaceful country, and yet the men he'd met so far were geared for trouble.

"I'm McKeon," Deuce nodded coolly. "Any objection?"

"None, none, friend," the curly-headed man drawled. "I'm Curly Ricter, hoss thief, outlaw and border-hopper. These here hombres with me are Branch Stone and Snake Peters."

"They hoss thieves, too?" Deuce asked.

Curly Ricter chuckled, and his teeth showed black and snaggly. "Yup," he drawled.

"I'm right glad to know you boys," Deuce said solemnly. "Have a drink?"

"Nope," Ricter shook his curly head. "We got to be moseyin'. Might be we'll see you ag'in."

Hoofs were pounding into the head of Yuba's wide street. They seemed to speed the exit of the trio. Deuce watched the men through the door, and the barkeep said behind him: "Them boys are tough."

"So am I," Deuce grunted, "and you'll find it out if you hand me any more warm beer!"

A fresh bottle appeared almost magically from beneath the bar. It was thoroughly chilled. Deuce poured and sipped, and waited to see what was going to happen next. He was still curious, and so far he hadn't found out a thing.

The incoming riders were drawing up before the Silver Lady. "Right popular place you got here," Deuce said across his shoulder.

The barkeep chuckled. "You're bringin' 'em in, mister," he said enigmatically. "Captain Jed Bronson, and his Fork outfit are the gents arrivin'. I know."

"Mebbe you know more," Deuce suggested.

Before the barkeep could attempt an answer, boots stamped on the porch, and the batwings screeched inward.

"Why in Hades don't you oil them hinges with some of yore sweat, Greasy?" a petulant voice demanded.

Deuce blinked. Nobody had to tell him that he was looking at Captain Bronson. The man was an erect, military figure. His spare body was straight as a rifle barrel. White mustaches bristled from beneath his beaked nose. His eyes were gray, and canny beneath bushy white brows. The five men behind him were just as heavily armed as had been the trio of horse thieves. Deuce began to feel naked with only one gun at his hip.

Captain Bronson of the Fork marched to the bar like a soldier on parade. "You know what we drink," he said irascibly.

"Yes, sir," the bartender said.

Deuce waited. He watched the Captain's eyes turn to scan him. "Are you Deuce

McKeon?" the Captain asked suddenly.

Deuce had trouble suppressing a smile. "That's me," he admitted quietly. "Seems I don't have to introduce myself around here!"

The Captain snorted through his hooked nose. "That cussed Leadbetter was a bigger coward than I figured him. Runnin' off to Tucson, and givin' you his 'Pache Canyon ranch in a poker game."

"I bought it fair and square," Deuce said coldly, "after he'd lost all his dinero backin' a pair of aces ag'in my deuces an' tens."

"What do you figger that two-bit spread is worth?" the Captain asked abruptly.

Deuce shrugged, and that feeling of curiosity was prickling about his ribs again. "Not having seen it yet,' 'he said equably, "I cain't say."

"Go take a good look, and name me a price," Captain Bronson demanded.

"I ain't hankerin' to sell" Deuce told the Fork owner coolly. "I was a cowpoke before I started backin' deuces. A man gits tired of smellin' cigar smoke and lookin' at green tables."

"I don't care what you've been," Captain Bronson growled.

"Neither do I, much," Deuce McKeon drawled. "But I'm goin' to be an honest rancher now. Folks leave me alone, I'll leave 'em alone."

"That Leadbetter was a coward," Bronson said again, to no one in particular. "He wouldn't have run off to Tucson if he warn't."

"I ain't no coward," Deuce drawled, "and I got a hankerin' to see this Circle L. If you gents will excuse me I'll be gittin' about it."

Captain Bronson planted himself directly in front of McKeon as he swung from the bar. "What kind of an offer did that cussed Curly Ricter make you?" he demanded.

"Ricter?" Deuce lifted his eyebrows, and he began to see the picture of two factions here in Yuba. He also began to see that old Jim Leadbetter had been lying when he'd said he'd been sorry to sell his Apache Canyon Rancho. The cuss had come to Tucson to get rid of it, and he hadn't cared just how.

"Ricter, the hoss thief?" Deuce continued. "Gents who steal hosses don't buy ranches!" He kept moving toward the batwings, and Bronson snorted behind him.

"Young feller, you take a good look at that spread!"

"I will," Deuce promised, and curiosity was still tickling at his ribs.

HIS MEETING with the town blacksmith, as he thought about it later, had proved no more satisfactory than had his connection with either Ricter or Captain Bronson. He had paused at the smithy's shop to inquire directions that he hadn't garnered in the Silver Lady, and the blacksmith had told him to travel south from Yuba on the wide trail he'd find. "Bronson and the rest of his Huachuca neighbors been bringin' so many cheap herds north from Mexico that they've beat a regular Trace. A gent cain't buy cattle hyar, feed 'em, raise 'em and sell for enough to make a profit. So all the outfits that can afford it are buyin' their stock in Mexico, and trailin' it through your Apache Canyon, then sellin' at railhead in Bisbee. So you foller the track, and you cain't miss your spread. Shack sits on a knoll, quarter mile or so from the only spring you'll find in the canyon."

"Water—" Deuce had said thoughtfully.

"Don't talk to me," the smithy had said hastily. "I didn't live long enough to git gray hair by blabbin'."

And that was all he had learned from the blacksmith about Leadbetter's Circle L. Deuce had followed the Trace, and now as dusk was bringing its shadows down from the high hills on either side of Apache Canyon, he saw the circle of willows that obviously marked the location of Surprise Spring which was the name of the waterhole on his newly acquired ranch.

Chiquita smelled the water, and headed for it immediately. Deuce let the mare have the reins. He was curious about the spring himself. Chiquita pressed through the willow screen, and dipped her velvet muzzle toward the still waters of the big pool, but her nose did not touch the water, for a voice drawled from the screening willows across the pool:

"That drink will cost you one dollar, stranger!"

Involuntarily, Deuce tightened his grip on the reins while his usually calm brown eyes searched the trees across from him. He caught the glint of fading light on gun-steel as a Winchester barrel poked its saddle-gun length into the clear.

"Payable in advance, amigo," the unseen voice continued.

Deuce reached for his watchpocket carefully. Jim Leadbetter had sold him some ranch! He pulled a bright cartwheel from his pocket, and held it in plain view between thumb and forefinger.

"Friend," he told the unseen waterhole guard, "this is yores if you want to come and get it." The guard, he realized, did not know him, and his voice grew confidential as he continued speaking: "I'm just ridin' through, amigo, on my way to the border. He had a little trouble in Tucson, and cut over the mountains to Yuba, and on thisaway. Howsomever, it's the fust time I've ever had to pay toll for waterin' my bronc. How come this charge?"

The guard emerged from the willows, rifle held carelessly in the crook of one arm. The man was nondescript looking, except for his eyes. They were a chill, shifty gray. Killer eyes.

"I ain't the one who sets the fee, amigo," he said equably. "Curly Ricter does that since Leadbetter got scared and lit a chuck."

"So—?" Deuce murmured. "And why'd he get scared?"

"Oh, we done it," the guard chuckled. "Leadbetter, he was an' old fool. He seemed to think water was somethin' you give away free. He let all the herds that come through drink for nothin'. Ricter, he had an idee they ought to pay for it. He tried to make Leadbetter see reason, but the old cuss was just plain bull-headed. Curly tole me he went and got hisself out from under by sellin' his spread to some gun-totin' gambler name of Deuce McKeon."

"You do tell," Deuce drawled, and he felt the fingers of his right hand start to itch.

"Say," the guard's snake-like eyes started to narrow, "you ain't by any chance been pullin' a sandy on me, have yuh? You ain't this feller McKeon?" The guard's rifle was slipping from the crook of his arm.

Deuce studied the action with remote pleasure. "That's my handle," he drawled. "Thanks for all that you have told me."

The guard cursed, and his surprised hands fumbled with the rifle stock as he tried to swing the weapon to his shoulder. Deuce felt the cedar-butt of his Colt against his palm. The guard was a killer. It was fight or die, and he had a hunch as his .45 slipped from greased leather that this wouldn't be the last time he might have to use his gun before peace returned to the Huachucas.

He felt the Colt lift and level in one smooth motion, then it was bucking in his fist, and he had no mercy for the man before the gun's muzzle. Hireling or not, he had no right to deprive animals of free water.

The guard got his rifle to his shoulder. Deuce saw pale orange flame blast from its muzzle, and felt the lead clip loose folds of shirt under his arm, then he watched a heavy slug from his own gun tip the other backward. Like a hinge the man's knees caved beneath him. The looseness of his body told Deuce McKeon that the gun-guard was dead. He watched the man fall face downward alongside the waterhole, and then he looked thoughtfully from the ribbon of smoke at his gun muzzle to the calm waters of the pool.

"Surprise Springs," he murmured. "Yeah. You're a surprise, all right!"

DEUCE LET Chiquita have her drink, then slowly, without a backward glance at the dead guard, he rode from the willows. A sharp bend in the canyon ahead had probably blotted the gun-sound, he decided. His cabin, more than likely, lay just beyond the hook.

As he rode slowly toward the bend, the whole pattern of just what was happening here lay plain before his eyes, and the picture was not pleasant. He couldn't blame an old peace-loving gent like Jim Leadbetter for skipping to Tucson and unloading his place on the handiest unsuspecting scapegoat. There were just two questions which bothered Deuce. Captain Bronson, for all his ornery manners, had looked like a pretty decent sort of hombre. If he was one of the reputable Huachuca ranchers, why hadn't Leadbetter appealed to him and the others who would be affected if Curly Ricter and his outlaws managed to gain control of Surprise Spring. Certainly the Huachuca outfits could muster enough men to buck Ricter.

There were only two possible answers as Deuce saw it. Either Leadbetter had known Bronson to be just as big a highbinder as Ricter, or else the Huachuca ranchers were loath to force an open range battle for control of the waterhole.

"Somehow we're going to git the answer to this," Deuce muttered to himself, "afore we go in for honest ranching. One way or t'other, it's got to be settled, and settled pronto. I ain't, and never was, the man to deny any cow-critter a drink of the stuff God made free to all of us!"

He was around the bend now, and the shack the blacksmith had mentioned stood outlined on a low knoll to the left. A tumble-down barn, and sagging corrals loomed behind it. Not a very prepossessing looking outfit, Deuce admitted, but the sight made his fingers start to itch for the feel of a hammer and paint brush. With peace and time to work, this could be made into a right pretty place to bring his fiancee, Mary Conway, who was just as tired of singing behind coaloil footlights as he was of dealing the pasteboards.

The plank door was closed. There was an air of emptiness about the place that was soothing after the tumult of his former life. Deuce swung down in front of the shack, drop-reining Chiquita.

"We'll take you out to the barn after I have a look-see inside," he told the mare. A spike through a rusty hasp held the door closed. Deuce lifted out the nail and gave the door a push.

It swung easily inward beneath his hand, and light paneled the center of the semi-dark room. Light that seemed to settle squarely on the barrels of three Colts trained at him from about the table in the center of the floor.

Curly Ricter sat directly facing McKeon, flanked by Snake Peters and Branch Stone. Ricter's loose lips were sagged open in a broken-toothed grin. "Told yuh we'd see you ag'in," he drawled, "but I reckon you didn't figger it'd be so soon. Branch and Snake done a good job of brushin' our tracks outa the yard."

There was a dusty rear window alongside the cook stove across the room. It caught the corner of Deuce's eye as he stood momentarily frozen at sight of the three outlaws, and the sight gave him just one thread of hope. He had backed the low cards for years, and Deuce McKeon was ready to back another low pair now, for the biggest stakes he'd yet gambled.

The Lord and practice had blessed him with a poker face that seldom showed surprise. It showed none now. One eyebrow quirked a little ironically as he answered the plainly confident outlaw.

"Why, Ricter," he drawled gently, "don't you figger I knew you gents were in here waitin' for me?"

"How could yuh figger it?" the border-hopper snapped. "Ain't no sign about?"

"You got a gun-guard out at the Spring, amigo," Deuce chuckled coolly, "and you know yourself there ain't no honor among thieves. Him and me had a leetle palaver, and it didn't take many cartwheels to swing him to my side of the fence. He's right outside that thar back winder, with a hog-laig trained on yore spine, Ricter. Told me he's been honin' for an excuse to salivate you for a long time. If you don't believe me, go take yourself a look."

"Why that skunky—" Ricter kicked back his chair with a curse. "Watch McKeon," he jerked at his companions, as he gained his feet and turned toward the back of the room.

But for the space of a second, Peters' eyes, and Stone's swung after the moving body of their leader. Deuce had counted on that break. Right hand streaking holsterward, he flung the heavy spike in his left hand at Peters' head. The strike of the nail at is ripped a jagged gash from ear to jawbone was that outlaw's first warning that a cyclone of trouble had hit the cabin. With a squall of rage, he started to whirl back but two long jumps had already carried Deuce to the table.

He saw Stone's weapon start to rise, and he smashed the man's gun-wrist with one down-swinging blow of his Colt. Snake Peters stumbled upright, blood streaming from his slashed jaw. Deuce heard the jolting cough of a Colt, and the strike of lead into a body but it was not his own.

Peters screamed hoarsely, and twisted away, hands clasping his stomach. "Curly, yuh got me—!"

"I'll git you all afore I'm done," the outlaw's face twisted murderously.

Deuce saw a second slug scar the table

close to his left hand, then once again he spent a single shot. Aimed deliberately low, he saw it curve a path through Ricter's right leg, and bring the outlaw tumbling forward like a man losing one stilt.

Stone was clutching his right wrist, blood oozing between his fingers. He looked like he was about to be sick. Catlike, Deuce retreated from the table. Brown eyes squinting through wisps of gunsmoke that filled the room, he addressed his remarks to Ricter, who was groaning, and trying to hold back the blood that was rapidly staining his pants' leg.

"You two boys oughta be glad you're still alive," he drawled. "Howsomever, afore we git done, mebbe you'll wish I'd sent you to join yore pard Snake."

"I told you we'd shoulda shot the cuss as he rid up to the door!" Branch Stone howled at his leader.

"Shut your trap!" Curly Ricter snapped. "We had to make McKeon sign over a legal deed to this Circle L afore we could make our gunrule stick."

"Which said McKeon ain't goin' to do," Deuce drawled. "Now we'll see can I patch you boys up so you can straddle broncs, then we'll be on our way."

The nucleus of the plan had come into his mind the minute he'd stepped through the cabin door and spotted the three outlaws waiting for him, and as they rode back along the length of Apache Canyon he had time to work out the details.

Yuba doorways and windows were bright with light when they reached the edge of the desert town.

"Cuss me if today warnt payday, and every cowpoke from Las Animas to the Huachucas is hyar celebratin'," Ricter groaned. "McKeon," he called in anguish across his shoulder, "don't ride us down main street thisaway. I'll show yuh a back way to the doc's—"

"Don't you big bold outlaws want folks seein' you ridin' in front of a gun 'stead of behind one?" Deuce queried, and elation brought a grin to his lips. He knew what happened to gun-toughs once their rep was gone. Curley Ricter and Branch Stone would be seen no more around these parts, once they recovered enough to travel. The knowledge made him chuckle.

Cowboys were tramping the boardwalks from saloon to saloon. A hurdy-gurdy blared behind the doors of one. Somewhere an exuberant rider punctured holes in the sky. Thus Yuba came back to life one night a month.

A shrill voice from in front of the Livery was the first to tell the town of their arrival. Deuce recognized the tones as belonging to the blacksmith.

"Hyar come the hoss-thieves, you hootenanies, with one pore little gambler herdin' 'em along. Now ain't this a sight!"

Others had recognized Ricter and Stone, and their ribald jests were enough to singe the ears of the self-acclaimed border-hoppers. Wobbling riders were leaving the boardwalks now to join in a procession behind them.

"You're passin' right by the sawbones' house," Ricter called to McKeon.

"So I am," Deuce agreed blandly. "Figured a little drink at the Silver Lady might perk you up first."

Light spraying the street from windows and batwings had already showed him that the horses Captain Bronson and his crew had ridden in were still at the rail. Evidently the Silver Lady was the saloon where owners and foremen gathered for their monthly spree. He hoped grimly that Bronson was still sober.

"One of you fellers help Curley outa his saddle," he appealed to the crowd. "He ain't walkin' very well."

With the two hang-headed outlaws still in front of him, Deuce mounted to the saloon porch. Every man that could make it came crowding in behind him. It had been a long time since Yuba had had this much excitement in one night.

CAPTAIN Jed Bronson, and a group of leather-faced oldtimers were seated around a poker table down the smoky room. At sight of the trio the captain jerked from his chair.

"Hell and damnation, what is this?" he roared, but there was a twinkle in his eye that belied the force of his words. He looked directly at McKeon behind his slumped prisoners. "What all these gents been doin'?"

"They made me an offer for my Circle L water," Deuce McKeon's brown eyes were suddenly boring into the Fork owner's face. "At gunpoint!"

"This afternoon you offered to buy me

out, too. If you were so willing to pay cash for that spread, why did Jim Leadbetter ride to Tucson and practically give me the danged ranch? Why didn't you make him an offer?"

A sudden hush was closing over the Silver Lady. Deuce watched the Fork owner lick lips that were suddenly dry.

"Why, I—" he couldn't seem to find any words.

"Might be Leadbetter refused you, figurin' you'd be just as much of a hog as these hombres in front of me?"

"No such thing!" the Captain was beginning to regain his composure. "Of course I might have had to charge a leetle somethin' for grass herds trampled— But the water would have been free," he hastened to add.

"There ain't no grass along the floor of that canyon worth mentioning," Deuce said sternly. "And the water's goin' to stay free tuh all of us, for now and forever, whether I'm daid or alive. I'm writin' me a will right here and now for all of yuh to witness, and that clause is goin' in it. I happen to know it'll hold in any court in the land. Anybody here got any objections to my doin' that?"

For a moment the silence held, and then a cheer that shook the old chandeliers rose from the crowd.

Captain Jed Bronson and Curley Ricter looked at each other like a pair of men who had been hit between the eyes. The Fork owner was the first to recover his composure.

"Why, McKeon," he drawled, loud enough for everyone to hear, "after lookin' at this pair of sidewinders and what yuh've done to 'em, I don't think anybody is going to make much objection at whatever you do. Fact is, you've done solved the peskiest problem we've had in a long time, and I want to be the first to tell yuh that if a few head of my next herd stray afar drinkin' at yore spring, I won't be the one to gather 'em up!"

"That," Deuce said, and he was thinking of paint brush and hammer and Mary Conway, "won't hurt my feelings at all. Peace and payday are two things we all need around here!"

LOST

Where'll I eat?

Where'll I Sleep?

Where's my girl?

Last week on KP I kept thinking, "When I get to New York on my furlough, that'll be the day!"

So here I am, only I don't know my way around any more'n the Man From Mars. Can't even find my girl in this whale of a station.

Tell me: what's a guy to do?

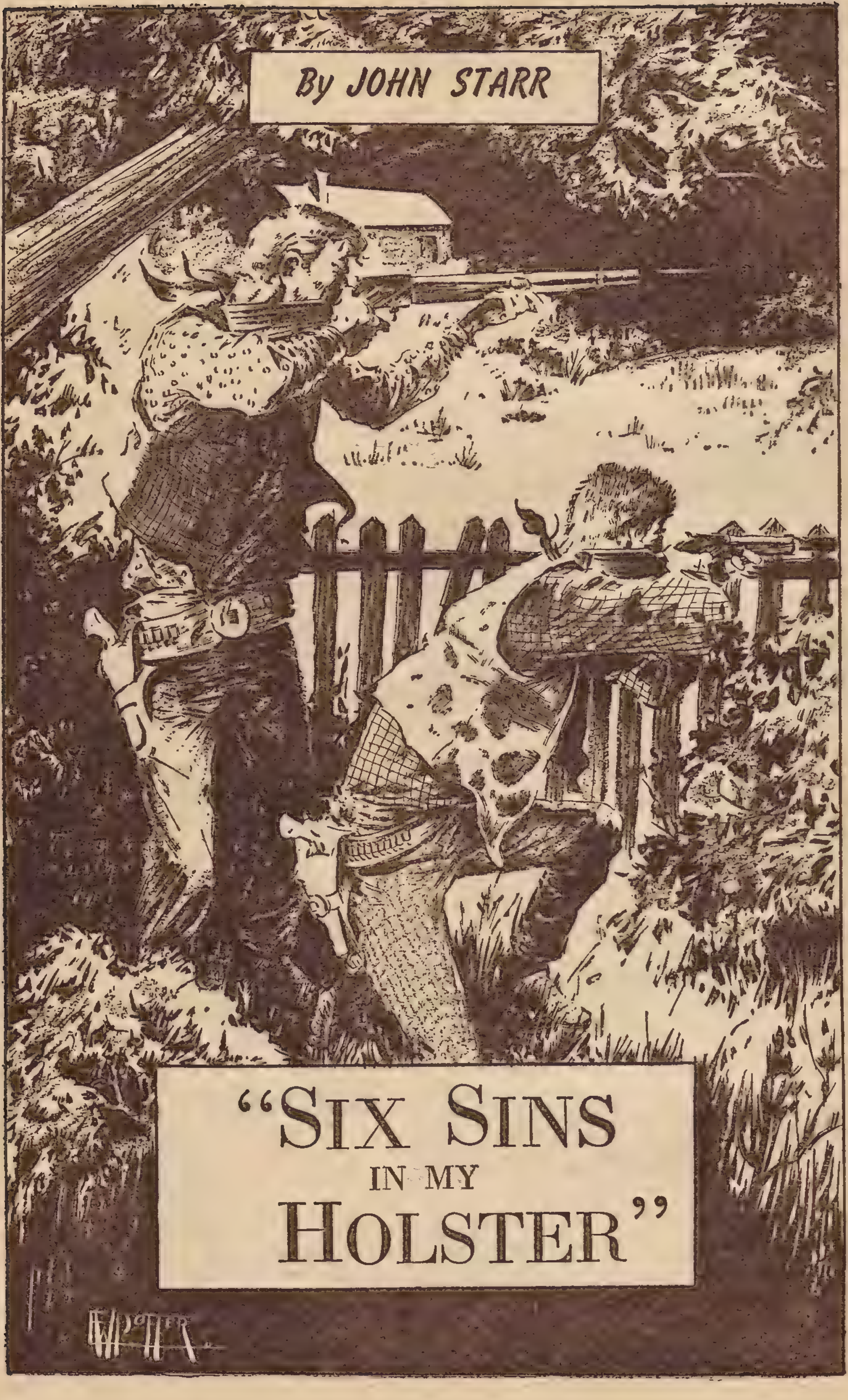
Listen, soldier, sailor, marine! We'll find a room for you, a good place to eat.

We'll even help you find your girl, who's probably hovering around this minute, looking for you.

That's what the Travelers Aid is here for—at the booth with the kindly light—to help you out!

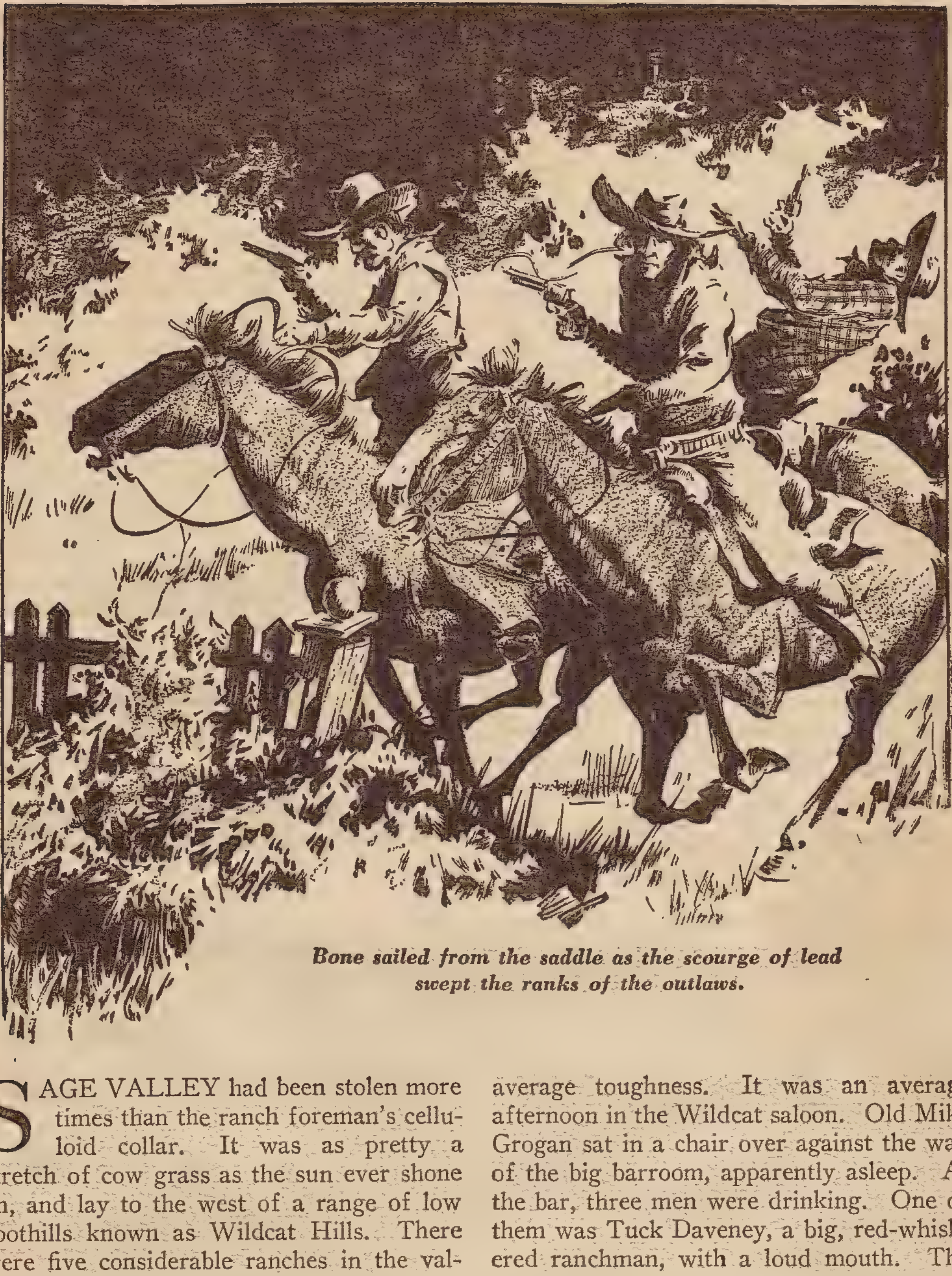
TRAVELERS AID SOCIETY

FREE ▶ 123 service men's lounges headed by those in Grand Central and Penn Stations, New York, 2,000 booths to help the troubled traveler, service man or civilian, friendly service for those who find themselves stranded, all this and more, without charge, is rendered throughout the country daily by the Travelers Aid Society.



"SIX SINS IN MY HOLSTER"

By JOHN STARR



Bone sailed from the saddle as the scourge of lead swept the ranks of the outlaws.

SAGE VALLEY had been stolen more times than the ranch foreman's celluloid collar. It was as pretty a stretch of cow grass as the sun ever shone on, and lay to the west of a range of low foothills known as Wildcat Hills. There were five considerable ranches in the valley, and then at the foot of the hills on the east side of Sage Valley there was a cluster of old cabins known as the Cross J. It was known chiefly as a rustler hangout. Adventurous men had squatted in those cabins from time to time, but most of them had been shot or hanged on suspicion. Ranchmen in the valley did business that way.

Twin Springs lay sprawled in a broad, low pass in Wildcat Hills, and was just an average cowtown, of a little more than average toughness. It was an average afternoon in the Wildcat saloon. Old Mike Grogan sat in a chair over against the wall of the big barroom, apparently asleep. At the bar, three men were drinking. One of them was Tuck Daveney, a big, red-whiskered ranchman, with a loud mouth. The other two were Lutie Bone, a strikingly handsome young chap, and his sidepartner, Willy Yarber. Then a dust-covered, travel-stained pilgrim strolled in and approached the bar. Sam Skinner, the barkeep, dubbed him a stranger, for he knew everybody in the country. Sam's mustache was so long that he wore it tucked over his ears. Instead of the stranger bawling for whiskey like a lost cow at a dry waterhole, he said: "I'm Vincent Randell. I've bought the old

Cross J, over on the west slope, and I—"

"You what!" yelled Sam Skinner, so excited that his mustache slipped off one ear, and he looked like a droop-horned cow.

"You heard me the first time," drawled Vin Randell. "I want a few good cowhands. You can pass the word along. Regular pay, good grub, and not too much work."

"Hold it, pardner," roared Daveney. "You say yo' name is Vin Randell. I never heard of you before, but I can tell you some news . You ain't bought the Cross J, because it belongs to me, and I ain't sold it to nobody. I reck'n you don't know Sage Valley very well."

"No, I don't," admitted Vin. "I have been told that all the title anybody had to land in that valley was a smoke title. That's the kind of title I got to the Cross J, and —I think it'll hold."

Mike Grogan had been peeping out from under the brim of his old hat at the stranger. He had seen a man like that once before, but this couldn't be that man. Suddenly, Mike's train of thought was broken and thrown clear off the track. Daveney was saying: "The hell you think it'll hold. I'm tellin' yuh it won't, and I know. In the first place, if you say you bought the Cross J, yore a damn liar. In the next—"

Tuck didn't say what was in the next place. Something very hard flew in from somewhere and lit on Tuck's chin. He must have thought it was a bird, for he could hear birds singing as he hit the sawdust and lay still. Lutie Bone and Willy Yarber started for their guns, got about half way, then turned around and came back. They were looking into the muzzle of the steadiest old cannon they had ever seen, and beyond it a pair of wintry gray eyes that looked like the open door of a morgue.

"Well, pardner," grinned Lutie, "you win this little pot because we didn't know you was loaded. But, I got to tell you that yore buckin' a stacked deck when you jump the Box D outfit. Tuck Daveney says gee and haw to everything in this section."

"He shore do," verified Willy Yarber, "and that ain't no fall-sa-fy-cation."

"All right," snapped Vin. "He ain't saying' nothin' to nobody right now. Drag him out of here and take him home until he gets sober enough to behave himself."

The two punchers got Tuck on his horse, and the three of them rode west out of town. Then Vin called for whiskey, and took himself one lonesome drink. As Vin set the empty back on the bar, Sam Skinner pushed the dragging mus-whiskers back over his ear and said:

"Pardner, you have just about played hell with yo' chance of leading a quiet life in this section."

"Looks that way," drawled Vin, "and now I'll tell you one. I seen you cut yo' eye at a gun under the bar, when you thought there might be smoke. What I got to tell you is this: Yo' job is measuring out poison and making change. If you ever drag any hardware when I'm having an argument in this joint, all the change you make will be to a warmer climate."

Vin turned his back on Sam and had started to roll a smoke, when he saw Old Mike Grogan standing within a few feet of him. Then Mike said: "Mister, you have lost a tap off'n yo' right heel. Come down to my shop, and I'll nail one on for you. Won't cost you anything. I just don't like to see a good boot ruined."

"That's fair enough," smiled Vin, and they left the Wildcat together. Mike noticed that this stranger took a quick look along the street in either direction as they stepped out the door.

MIKE'S SHOP was about fifty feet from the Wildcat, and on the same side of the street. They went in, Vin sat down and removed the wounded boot, and Mike took it. Instead of going to work at once, Mike held the boot at arm's length, and studied it, then said in a musing tone: "Pretty fair boot. Shop-made of course. You couldn't find a readymade boot that would fit that hoof of yo'n in five years. Did yo' Pappy have feet like them?"

Vin shot a questioning look at the old boot-maker, and said: "I don't know. My Pappy was killed when I was just a kid. I don't recollect ever noticing his feet. What of it?"

Mike had found the right piece of leather, put it in place, and had driven one nail. Then he laid his hammer down and said: "Nothin'—maybe. I been makin' boots for forty year, and I ain't made a dozen pair for feet like them. They are thorobred hoofs, and you ain't got no call to be ashamed of 'em. I never saw a man with hoofs like them who wouldn't go—and stay."

"Thank you," grinned Vin. "I knew there was a difference in the hoofs of horses, but I never heard that there was anything about the hoofs of humans, except part of the leg bent sidewise to walk on. Didn't know the shape of a man's foot meant anything."

"It does," said Mike, succinctly," and I have studied human hoofs a whole lot. Callin' this Twin Springs place hell—and that's a compliment to it—I have saw the tracks of plenty of range stock about it, but I never seen but one pair of thorobred hoofs hereabouts—until you showed up. Thorobred hoofs in hell ain't common."

"If these land-paddles of mine are that good," chuckled Vin, "I guess I ought to keep myself shod all round most of the time."

"Yep," said Mike. Then he went on nailing the heel tap in place. Vin sat studying him. Mike had shrunken until he would weigh about ninety pounds. He had a cloud of white whiskers, and white hair peeped out from under his hat, which he rarely removed, but his eyebrows were as black as jet, and his dark eyes fairly glistened as he worked without glasses. There was something almost uncanny about the old man's face, and the way he talked about human hoofs and their meaning. Vin could read human faces pretty well, but reading human feet was beyond him. Mike finished the nailing, but set the boot on the floor without trimming and polishing the leather. He leaned forward from his bench, pulled aside a dirty curtain that hung from a shelf and drew out a pair of new boots. Removing the trees from them, he handed them to Vin.

"Fine pair of boots," said Vin, "but too rich for my blood. Must cost around fifty dollars."

"They did," admitted Mike. "Them boots was ordered, paid for and made fifteen year ago, but they weren't called for because—. Try 'em on, and if they fit I'll give 'em to you."

Vin pulled one of the boots onto his bare foot, and stood up: "Fits like it was made for me." Then he put on the mate to the new one. "They fit better than my own boots."

"Yep," grunted Mike. "Pretty hard to make a boot to fit a hoof like yo'n. You inherited them hoofs from yo' Pappy. Them boots was made for him, and he—"

"Hold it," yelled Vin. "What are you talking about?"

"Thorobred hoofs in hell," growled Mike. "I heard you say yo' name was Vin Randell. Maybe it is, but that ain't all of it. The rest of it is Purdom. Yo' Daddy was Charley Purdom, of the old Rainbow ranch, in Sage Valley. The boots you got on was made for him, and he was drygulched and killed before he could call for 'em. Him and his whole family was murdered, but—"

"Supposing you are right," Vin said, soberly. "What is your idea? Want to get me drygulched too?"

"Nope," said Mike. "Sit down and let's talk a spell. I'm the oldest thing in this section except the rocks and the two springs. About twenty year ago I thought I might be a good prospector. The place I picked to find out was not a good one. It was the desert that lies in east of here. I was lost in there for three days, without water. Then my jackass, havin' more sense than I had, led to these springs. I don't think even Indians had been here before that. I wouldn't leave the water. Some more people comes along, and from that grows this here town of Twin Springs.

"I had been here about five years, when Charley Purdom comes to town one day, takes a few drinks with the natives, orders a pair of boots from me, gets his measure took, pays me fifty dollars, and rides out of town. I never seen him again. Somebody brings the news to town that the Rainbow Ranch, out on the Cold Water Creek, in Sage Valley, had been burnt, and everybody there murdered. So—maybe you better talk some, now."

"Did you go out to the Rainbow when the news came in?"

"No," replied Mike. "If they had wanted to hang somebody for that dirty job, I'd have gone along, but they didn't. Some fellers went out there, and when they comes back they report that they found six bodies in the ashes of the house, and they must have been Purdom and his wife, and four children. All the hands at the place had been killed, and was lying around where they had fell as they runs out of the bunkhouse when the mess starts. You don't need to be afraid to talk to me. I was Charley Purdom's friend, and I'm yo' friend. If you ever find any of the men who burnt the Rainbow, and I'm alive, I'll help you hang 'em. If you have come here to look into that old mess, I'll back you any way I can."

"That story is all right," said Vin. "The only trouble is that it could be told about most any settlement on the frontier. Such things were always happening."

"I know that," admitted Mike, "but they ain't plenty of men with hoofs like yo'n and Charley Purdom's. Listen, Vin. I hate them Wildcats as much as anybody can. I owned this whole town one time, and they euchered me out of it. I don't know which ones, but I'm certain that some of the men that burnt the Rainbow are in Sage Valley now, on the land they stole from Purdom. Tuck Daveney went clean crazy when you mentioned smoke titles. If you have come back here to try to get what's right, you just rented yourself a room in hell when you went to the Cross J. Still and all, whatever you want to do I'll help all I can, and what you say to me won't go any further."

"I RECK'N I'll talk," Vin said, slowly, "but what I'm going to say ain't as reasonable as a woman's hat, and nobody would believe it. I am Charley Purdom's son. I was just ten years old when the Rainbow was burned, and I'm twenty-five now. I had two sisters older than myself, and one sister younger. Being the only boy, Dad kept me with him most of the time, and tried to make a man of me. The country had got full of thieves, and they were called Wildcats because they hung out in Wildcat Hills.

"When the Cats began to work on the Rainbow stock, Dad thought he was getting ready for them. One thing he did was to put a lot of papers in a little tin box. Then he and I took the box to a bluff about a mile from the house, and hid it in a little cave. Dad said if the Cats burned our house, we would still have the land left, and could build another house. He said the deed from the government to all of Sage Valley was among the papers in the box.

"A little later, the Wildcats did burn the house, but they killed everybody in it, and ten cowhands who were in the bunkhouse. One of the bodies found in the house was an orphan boy who had come to live with us a short while before that."

"Where was you?" asked Mike.

"I had gone to a line cabin in the foothills west of the valley to take some orders to a cowboy who was staying there, and watch for Wildcats. That cowboy's name was Larkin, but everybody called him Lark. It was almost night when I reached the cabin. I ate supper with Lark, and then we played pitch until pretty late. Lark decided to go part of the way home with me. He was about twenty-five then. When we got out into the valley we saw a big light, and thought the range was afire, but we soon discovered it was the Rainbow.

"The Wildcats had done their work and gone, when we got there. We dismounted and stole up to the place on foot. Just before we reached where the house had stood, we heard someone groan. We went to him, and it was an old puncher named George Griggs. He was lying in the trail, dying. Lark tried to talk to him, but all George ever said was: 'Them Wildcats got everybody but you two, and they'll get you if you don't high-tail it out of the country. Don't bother about me. I'll be gone in a minute. The folks in the house was burnt up. Somebody will bury the rest of us.' Lark asked him if he knew any of the killers, but he didn't answer.

"What happened after that is a long story. All I'll say is that Lark found a couple of horses in the remuda that didn't wear a Rainbow brand, and we rode from there. Well out of the country, we got work. At first, Lark passed me off as his kid brother, but by the time I was fourteen I was making a full hand. We drifted all over the cow country, but I never forgot that Sage Valley belonged to me by rights. So, we came back here and holed up at the Cross J cabins. I meant to try to find the old tin box, get the deeds, and go into court and prove my rights. We went to the place at night, but there is no bluff near it that is as high as the one where we hid the box."

"Huh," grunted Mike. "The bluff is like always. Trouble is that you have growed up, and things don't look as big to you as they did when you was a kid."

"Maybe that's right," said Vin, musingly. "Sage Valley doesn't look half as wide as it used to, and Cold Water isn't the river it used to be. If I could find that box, I'd have a deed to Sage Valley and everything in it."

"If you had that deed," said Mike, "and Tuck Daveney knew you had it, you'd have as fine a death warrant as ever was wrote."

"I suppose so," said Vin. "What would you do, in my place?"

"If *I* was in yo' place," growled Old Mike, "I'd get about four more legs under me, and try to see how far I could ride from Sage Valley before I killed a hawss, but—you won't do it. Gents with hoofs like yo'n don't run from anything. Charley Purdom had plenty of chance to run out of Sage Valley, but he didn't do it, and you won't. What went with Lark?"

"He's out at the Cross J cabins, nursing a bad boil on his neck. Him and me has saved us a little money. Enough to make a payment on some cows, but we wanted to look things over before we brought anything in. Main thing we want is a chance to look for that box."

"I see," said Mike. "You left Lark in a pretty bad spot, and you better get back to him. As soon as Tuck Daveney gets his head screwed back on, he's going to try to find out if that smoke title of yo'n will hold the Cross J. Better pick up a few extra boxes of cartridges at the store."

"I hadn't thought of that," said Vin. "Guess I'll ride as soon as you finish that boot."

"Never mind the boot. Wear the ones you have on. I'll finish that one after you are gone, and you can get 'em some other time. As I says, I'm the oldest thing in this section except the rocks and such, but I can still see and hear, and do pretty well at keeping my mouth shut. If I see or hear anything that you ought to know, I'll try to get word to you. Better ride, now."

Vin thanked him, gripped his hand, and left the shop. As he strode on toward the store he looked down at those wonderful boots and mused: "Thorobred hoofs in hell. I never thought I'd live to literally stand in my daddy's boots. As I recollect him, it took something of a man to fill his boots. I'll do my best to fill them out."

As he rode on toward the Cross J Vin was thinking that he had not got much out of his visit to Twin Springs, but he had won a friend, to offset the flock of enemies that he had made. Vin was wondering now how soon his smoke title to the Cross J would be tested.

IT WAS almost sunset when Vin reached the tumbledown old cabins at the Cross J. Grim, leathery old Lark had a fat meat poultice bound to his neck with a handkerchief. His neck was swollen, his face red and his temper rotten. He glared at Vin in silence as the boy tossed a bag of provisions into a corner, then carefully stacked half a dozen boxes of cartridges on the little shelf over the fireplace.

"Goin' to war?" rasped Lark.

"Dunno," replied Vin. "Listen, Lark. We've been dealt a bobtailed flush in this Sage Valley mess, and there's not much chance to fill on the draw. The deck has been stacked." Then Vin told what had happened at Twin Springs, concluding with: "Lark, you have been mighty good to me, and I ain't got no call to invite you to get killed. We are about four inches from the middle of hell right now, but you've got time to ride out of it if you want—"

"For *me* to ride out?" snarled Lark. "What are you going to do?"

"I aim to stay, as long as I last," replied Vin.

Vin would make about two of the wizened old puncher, but to Lark, Vin was still the orphaned kid that he had taken away from the smoldering ruins of the old Rainbow. He now glared at Vin and stormed: "Why, dang yo' ornery little hide! I'd orto take a wet rope to you. Just because I'm damn nigh dead don't give you no call to insult me. I never have been a quitter. If you ever mention me quitting again, I'll waste a plumb good bullet on you. If you got anything in that pack that's fitten to feed a man about fifteen minutes before rigor mortis sets in, throw it together, and try to save my life."

Vin had gone to the little old stove and, with his back to Lark, he was grinning. He'd had to tell Lark that, but he had known what the answer would be. Lark had plenty more to say, and he jerked his head around to say it. Then he let out a wild yell:

"Ow—ooo! Owich! Hell's bells and hot soup! I—dam'f I ain't dyin', Vin!"

"What the heck's the matter with you?" snapped Vin. "I haven't even told you that I brought a pint of licker, so I know you ain't drunk. You must be crazy, you locoed bush-horner. Stop that noise."

"Is—is that all you got to say to yo' sufferin' side partner?" Lark asked, weakly.

"No. I can say plenty more, if you want me to."

"Never mind," said Lark, with a long-drawn sigh of relief. "I'm better now that my bile's busted, but damn my hide if I didn't think my head had fell off, at first, but—I reck'n it didn't."

Vin ministered to Lark as best he could, then cooked supper. They ate in thoughtful silence, then rolled smokes and went on being silent. Heavy matters were on their minds. Suddenly they both sat up in the gathering darkness, and listened. A single horse was coming along the trail. It stopped at the broken front gate, and a high-pitched voice hailed the house.

"It's a kid," rumbled Lark.

"I'll go out and see who it is," said Vin, as the voice called again, impatiently.

Vin stepped out the door. Lark stood inside listening: "Are you Vincent Randell?" asked that squeaky voice.

"Yes."

"How many men you got in that shack?"

"Just one besides myself," replied Vin, "and he's about dead." Vin could hear Old Lark cursing him for a liar. "Light and come in. We've just et, but I can fix something for you."

The rider slid to the ground. Seeing the figure dimly against the skylight, Vin decided it was a boy, or a very small man. They walked to the door together, and entered. Lark had his back turned, and was lighting a lamp. He turned and looked at the stranger, then gasped: "Well, I'll be damned! I—Excuse me, Miss. I—"

"You weren't expecting a girl to be prowling the country alone at night," she smiled. "I wouldn't be doing it, but it is important to you two men."

"Take a seat," invited Vin.

THE GIRL sat down. She might be eighteen—certainly not older than that. She had a fine, erect figure, coppery hair, dark brown eyes, and rather pretty suntanned features: "I'm Octavia Wells. Most folks call me Tavy, and say I am wild. Maybe I am. Some things make me almost wild. My father, Jim Wells, bought a ranch on Cold Water and we moved in here two years ago. I don't like it. Too much killing, and I want to stop some of it if I can."

"Good work for any woman," smiled Vin, wondering what this queer girl was leading up to.

"I can't stay long," she went on, "because I don't want to get caught at this. Lutie Bone came to our house a little while before night, and told Dad that some rustlers had holed up at the old Cross J cabins. He said the Box D outfit, and anybody else that would join them, were coming out here tonight and have a little hanging. Dad told Lutie he wouldn't go. Then when Lutie was gone Dad said it was likely to get him into trouble with the other ranchers in Sage Valley because he wouldn't throw in with them, but he didn't believe in that sort of rough stuff. Now, I don't like Lutie Bone. He thinks he's the handsomest thing on high heels, and that every girl in the settlement is crazy about him. I thought it would be a good joke on Lutie to come here and warn you fellows. Then when Lutie comes with his gang he won't find anybody, and it'll be like the snipe hunt that some of the boys took a tenderfoot on, and they'll all hooraw Lutie. I got to go now, so you boys can do your running. I don't want anything to eat."

"Thank you for warning us," Vin said, gravely, "but—"

"You don't owe me any thanks. I'll get mine from hearing folks hooraw Lutie Bone. Don't come with me. I can find my horse. So long, and don't hang around until they come."

"Good night," said Vin.

They stood listening until they heard the horse gallop away down the trail, and then Lark exploded: "Now I know I'll be damned. Wants to play a joke on the handsome Mr. Bone, does she? Well, she has damn shore done it."

Vin made no immediate reply or remark

of any kind. Up to that very day he had been just the kid to Lark, who had been his leader and monitor in all things. Now, it was different. He had come into Sage Valley on a wild gamble. He did not know at the moment that Tuck Daveney, as a young outlaw, had led the gang that burned the Old Rainbow, and as they thought, murdered the entire Purdom family. He did know that Sage Valley had been stolen, and that he alone had valid title to it, and could prove his claim. He had looked the situation over, and had almost concluded that Sage Valley was not worth the fight that he would have to make to get it.

That had been in his mind when he had ridden into Twin Springs to get a little grub to hold himself and Lark together for a few more days. His statement that he had bought the Cross J, and wanted some hands, was just a bluff, to see what would happen. He had found out, and when his reference to "smoke titles" had infuriated Tuck Daveney so, he began to feel that he was uncovering something. Then when Old Mike Grogan made his talk about "thorobred hoofs in hell," he was determined to make the fight, if he had to make it alone.

With his sense of fairness that he had inherited from his father, along with those thorobred feet, he had given Lark a chance to ride out of the mess if he wanted to. Now, after a long silence, Vin said: "Lark, you have just about been a father to me since the night that the Old Rainbow was burned. All these years you have led the way, and you have never led me wrong, Now it is different. This is my fight, and I must lead it. I told you that you could ride out of it, and you said you would stay. Now, I'll put it another way. Are you willing to let me lead, and still stay with me like always?"

Old Lark made a queer noise in his throat, and said in a husky tone: "Vin, I have knowed all along this time would come. Me, I ain't nothin' but a cowhand with a little guts. You are Old Man Charley Purdom's boy, and a chip off the old block. He was the squarest man I ever seen, and he'd fight hell for what was his own. You was speakin' Old Man Charley's language when you told me I could ride out of this if I wanted to. I'm speakin' my own language when I tell you I'll follow you clean through hell and back, go where you go, and do anything you say. What's the word?"

"The word is this," Vin's own voice was tense and vibrant. "I am going to make the fight for Sage Valley, and it is going to start right here at the Cross J. The odds are all against us, but I've had two breaks today, and maybe we'll have some more. Load your guns and stuff your pockets full of cartridges. I'll do the same, then we'll just wait and see what happens." Armed for war, Vin stepped out the cabin door.

"Hold it, Vin," growled Lark. "You don't aim to let them buzzards run you away from the Cross J, like that gal said, do you?" The habit of leading was still strong on Lark, but it was broken when Vin said:

"I don't aim to let anybody run me an inch from anywhere. Them killers will expect us to be in the cabin, and we won't be there. Am I leading from here on, or not?"

"My mistake," husked Lark. "I won't make it again. Lead on."

THERE WAS an old worm fence around the yard. Vin led the way to the front corner of that yard, which was about eighty feet from the cabin door. There they crouched in the deep shadow of the fence and waited for company.

Tuck Daveney usually led his killers when some undesirable outfit had to be killed off. He had got his head screwed back in place, but it ached and his chin was still sore. So, he sent Lutie Bone to lead the mob of twenty tough killers, with instructions to get the men at the Cross J, and get them good. Any reference to land titles in Sage Valley always upset Tuck, and Vin's remarks about "smoke titles" had set him raving.

It was not that Tuck suspected that any heir of Charley Purdom lived, but that he had been skating on thin ice ever since he had burned the Rainbow, and taken possession of the valley. He had sold much of it to other ranchers of his own sort. Then he had sold Jim Wells a block of land adjoining his own ranch. Wells had offered a good price for the land, and in his greed Tuck couldn't turn it down. Wells was not his kind, but since he controlled all the other ranchers in the valley, he was sure that he could control Wells. If it came to the worst, he could get the Wells land back, the same way that he had originally got it from the Old Rainbow outfit.

Vin and Lark had been crouched in the shadows for an hour. Neither of them had spoken. Suddenly, they both moved slightly, and listened. "There they come," whispered Vin. "Let me fire first, then give 'em everything you got."

Twenty riders pulled up in front of the old cabin, and Lutie Bone hailed the house. There was no reply, and he yelled: "Come on out, you polecats. We don't aim to do anything but hang you. It won't hurt much." Still there was no answer, and Lutie snarled: "Throw some lead into that old shack. That'll wake 'em up and let 'em know we mean business . . ."

A volley of shots were fired, and bullets thudded into the cabin. The firing ceased, and there was no sound to be heard: "Aw hell, Lutie," whined Willy Yarber. "It don't do a feller no good to hang him after he's dead. Let some of us go in there and drag 'em out and hang 'em nacheral."

"All right, Willy," said Bone. "Take some of the boys and go on in. If they break out the rest of us can get 'em on the wing."

Willy and half a dozen others dismounted and headed for the door. Willy had his hand on the latch when a single shot crashed from the shadow of the fence, and Willy lay down on the doorstep. Within ten seconds that old fence was blazing, and there was a string of men on the ground from the door to the gate. It didn't stop at that. Vin and Lark stood up so they could fire over the fence, and their bullets were sweeping the row of horsemen in front of the cabin. The killers were firing at the gunflashes now, but getting no results. A man was shot from his saddle right by the side of Lutie Bone. This was too much for the bold, bad Mr. Bone. He wheeled his mount, dug in his spurs and went from there, followed by such of his mob as could follow. Lutie was ready to swear by the sky above that there were fifty men at those cabins. There was silence for a moment, then Vin heard someone groaning outside the gate. He and Lark went to the gate, and Vin called: "What's the trouble, partner?"

"I'm—I'm shot apart," groaned the man on the ground. "For godsake see can you do something for—" His voice trailed into silence, but for a low moaning, wheezing sound.

They went to where the man lay. He was out when they reached him, but roused when they turned him over: "Was Tuck Daveney in on this?" asked Vin.

"No, damn his cowardly soul, he wasn't. He sent Lutie Bone to rod the deal, and when it gets hot Lutie runs out of it, the yaller skunk. You—you fellers can't do anything for me, but—if you ever see Tuck Daveney I want you to tell him something for me."

"All right," said Vin, "what's the word?"

"Tell him I said he was the dirtiest thief, liar and drygulcher in the known world. I always wanted to tell him that, but didn't have the sand. I ain't afraid to send word to him. He thinks because he burnt the Rainbow, and Stole Sage Valley, he can do anything he likes, but—"

"Do you know that Tuck Daveney did that?" asked Vin.

"Shore I know it. I was with him, and I'd of made him come clean with me, only he knowed too much on me. He split with some of the others, and let them take land, because they knew too much on him. They are all thieves and killers, except—except Jim Wells, and he won't be in Sage Valley long. He's due to get bumped off as soon as Lutie marries his gal—or finds out that he can't get her. Lutie is Tuck's brother-in-law, and has his own way about the Wells outfit. He—"

THE confessed murderer and incendiary had spoken his last word. Vin and Lark left him and walked back into the yard. "Lay hold, Lark, and let's drag these buzzards outside." When they had finished, eight bodies lay in a row just outside the gate. Then they entered the old cabin and rolled smokes.

"You said something about getting a coupla breaks today," growled Lark. "Looks to me now that you got about three."

"I don't know whether to call this a break or not," Vin told him. "We had some luck in that fight, but if it hadn't been for that girl telling us what to expect, probably we would both be dead now. I don't know what her idea was for coming here, but it is a cinch that she doesn't know what danger she and her Daddy are in. From what she said, and the way she said it, Lutie Bone hasn't got a chance to win her, and when she tells him that things will happen suddenly."

"Looks like a sorty bad mess for the Wells outfit," grunted Lark, "but you and me have got some troubles of our own. When Tuck Daveney gets a report on this little party, he's goin' to hunt us with hounds, and he'll bring a skinnin' knife and some salt."

"Tuck won't have to hunt me," said Vin. "Now that I know he led the gang that burned the Rainbow, I'm going to hunt him and either kill him or get killed. Let's go to bed and get some sleep. They won't be back tonight."

A little while before daylight next morning Vin and Lark rode away from the Cross J. Quarter of a mile back in the hills they stopped on the crest of a little knob, rode behind a screen of cedars, and set themselves to watch the place and see what happened. Just at sunrise they saw the mob approach the cabins. There were forty of them, and they had a wagon with them, to haul in their dead. Vin wondered if they had forced Jim Wells to join them. He also wondered if Tavy Wells had heard what happened to her snipe-hunters. The killers went all over the place. Then they broke into little squads, and seemed to be looking for something.

"Trying to pick up our trail," grunted Lark. "This is a good place to stop some more of 'em if they follow us."

If they found the trail they didn't follow it. Lutie Bone had told them there were at least fifty men in that gang of rustlers, and from the way things were shot up, they believed it, and had no desire to ride into such a trap. So, they set the Cross J cabins on fire, loaded their dead and went back to the Box D.

"I said I wouldn't run an inch from anybody," Vin said, "but I'm not crazy enough to think that any two men could whip a mob like that in a fair fight. We've got to trim them a little at a time until we can get to Tuck Daveney."

"Shore," said Lark. "We'll just wait until they scatter again, and flush 'em when we can. Seeing that fire reminds me of the Old Rainbow that night, and I reck'n the same man set it. We both want to kill him right smart, but we don't want to get kilt before the main show starts. We got to have a place to hole up until we can get to Tuck, and I know where it is. It's fifteen year since I rid these old Wildcat Hills, but I know a place where the Devil couldn't find us with a lantern, in broad open daylight."

"Lead to it," ordered Vin.

Lark led on into the hills, keeping a southerly course, until they came out in a tiny valley where some cows were grazing. "You are going to ride square into Twin Springs, first thing you know," Vin told him.

"No I ain't. It's more'n a mile from here to town." Lark uncoiled his rope and swung at a fat calf. A few minutes later they rode on, with the calf behind Lark's saddle. "Couldn't shoot it," he grunted. "Don't want to make too much noise."

They had gone but little farther, when Lark pulled up in the head of a deep, crooked gorge. There they dismounted and entered a cave. "Just like I left it," said Lark. "Worst outlaw that was ever in these hills lived in this cave. Charley Purdom and me tracked him in here and taken him, but—he wasn't hard to take. He had been shot up like a hogbed, and we trailed him by blood. He died pretty soon after we gets to him. We just lashed his carcass to his saddle, and taken him into Twin Springs. Never did tell where we found him, and how we taken him. I reck'n I'm the only man on earth that knows where this cave is at. We got plenty of meat, but not enough salt and other things."

Vin and Lark were wanted men, now, but they also wanted another man—Tuck Daveney. They wanted to get Tuck, make him talk, then hang him if they could, but they had no idea of the chore that it was going to be, so long as Tuck kept the mob of killers he had, and continued to hold Twin Springs and Sage Valley in his grip.

Some time after dark that night Old Mike Grogan left the Wildcat saloon apparently pretty drunk. He staggered out the door, then stumbled away in the darkness toward his little shop. He lived in a little den at the back of the shop. No one ever paid any attention to old Mike. He kept his mouth shut, and attended to his own business. He got pretty drunk sometimes, but never drunk enough to talk a lot, or make trouble.

Mike smoked a stinking old black pipe, but he had a keen scent. The front door of his shop was never locked. He slipped in, closed the door behind him, then stopped and sniffed. Someone was smoking, or had smoked a cigarette in his shop. He was about to call out, when Vin said in a hoarse whisper: "Steady, Mike. I'm Vin Randel, and I want to talk to you."

"Follow me," husked Mike, and led the way through another door into his den, where he lighted a candle: "It's you all right, but what in hell's blazes are you doin' in Twin Springs? Don't you know that Tuck Daveney and his gang are hunting you, to hang you?"

"Well," drawled Vin, "that's fair enough. I'm hunting Tuck, and some of his gang, for the same purpose."

"Oh, you are?" rasped Mike. "You can find 'em easy enough. Tuck and about forty of his gang are in the Wildcat, trying to drink the place dry. I got where I could see and hear, and had to get pretty drunk, in order to stay there and watch and listen. They comes to town this afternoon, and Tuck is on the prod proper. You don't have to tell me what happened at the Cross J. Tuck told the cock-eyed world, and told 'em what a shame it was that a gang of thieves could pot honest cowhands, and nothing be done about it. He said you had a gang of about thirty tough killers. I know that's a lie, but here is the truth. You ain't got no business in Twin Springs tonight. What did you come for?"

"Grub," replied Vin. "We have plenty of meat, but we want salt and pepper, coffee, a sack of flour, some baking powder, a slab of bacon, and some canned goods. Can you go to the store and get it for us?"

"Me?" chuckled Mike. "I haven't bought more than a dime's worth of anything at one time in twenty year. If I went to the store and bought that much stuff, somebody would follow me to see if I had gone crazy. I don't know how—wait a minute. Old Ramon Diego runs a chili joint in town. I saved the old rascal's neck a few years ago when some gents wanted to hang him. He'll get it for me—if they don't think he stole the money, and stop him. We'll have to chance that. I'll be back in a little while, but—hold on. I ain't apt to talk to you much when I get back here, and there's one more thing I want to tell you. There's one rancher in Sage Valley that don't need killin'. That's Jim Wells. He owns the J W ranch, up Cold Water a ways from the Box D, and he's in trouble."

"What kind of trouble?" asked Vin, innocently.

"Well, he buys that ranch a coupla year ago, without finding out what kind of neighbors he's getting. Now, he can't get out without losing everything he's got, and—he can't stay without maybe losing his life. He's been getting along, but now a showdown has come. He wouldn't go help hang you fellers last night, and Tuck got sore about that. Before daylight this morning, Tuck and some others went by to get Jim to go to the Cross J with them, and bring in some carcasses, and he wouldn't do that. Tuck called him on it, and told him he either belonged, or he didn't, and he'd better make up his mind, because some things are goin' to happen in Sage Valley. Jim was in town today, and told me about that part of it. He left before Tuck and them comes in. I'm just tellin' you this, so's you won't kill Jim by mistake. I sorta like him."

"All right," said Vin, impatiently. "Get that stuff for me as quick as you can. While you are out, take a gander in at the Wildcat, and see if Tuck and his gang are still there."

Mike was back within fifteen minutes. He reported that Tuck and his gang were still in the Wildcat, some of them too drunk to ride, and there was no sign that the place had gone dry. He also said the stuff Vin wanted was out back of the shop. Two horses were standing close together, and a man was leaning on the saddle of one.

"Grab some of this stuff, Lark, and let's ride for the hangout," snapped Vin. "We have business on hand."

Jim Wells was a very uneasy ranchman that night. Tuck Daveney had told him that Wildcat Hills had always been a hangout for rustlers and lobos. That a new gang had made up at the Old Cross J. That his boys had jumped them the night before, and eight of his men had been killed. That was when Tuck had told Jim that he would have to get in on the game, or else.

It was past midnight, but Jim Wells was not sleepy. He had told Tavy everything, and Tavy had told him nothing. That is, nothing about her trip to the Cross J the night before that. She didn't want Jim to know about that crazy ride. So they sat in silence, dreading to go to bed, only to lie awake thinking over their situation. Suddenly, they both started violently as a light tapping came at the door. Men had knocked at that door before, but not at that time of the night. They hesitated a moment, and the tapping came again. Wells opened the door, and saw a stranger standing on the gallery in the bar of light from the door. Tavy had risen, but she couldn't see the man.

"Mr. Wells?" came the greeting.

"Yes, I'm Jim Wells."

"I'm Vin Randell." Tavy's knees buckled and she dropped into a chair. The cat would be out of the bag now. "Sorry to disturb you at this time of night, but I have some important business with you, and it can't wait."

"Come in," invited Jim, "and we can talk it over."

THEY entered the room. Tavy forced herself to rise, and was waiting sentence, when Jim said: "This is my daughter, Tavy, Mr. Randell." Vin acknowledged the introduction, giving no hint that he had ever seen the girl before. They all sat down, and Tavy gave a sigh of relief. Vin didn't seem to notice her, except to say to Wells: "Is it safe to talk here?"

"Yes," replied Wells. "Nobody about the house but Tavy and me. I don't have any secrets from Tavy. We're sorta pardners."

"Fine. I came here to tell you that your property, and your very life, are in danger. You are the only ranchman in this valley who is not a thief and a killer. I understand that you have been here two years. A cowman ought to be able to find out what kind of neighbors he has in that time. How do you like them?"

"They haven't done me any harm," Wells said, cautiously, "but some of them ain't the sort of neighbors I like."

"I see," smiled Vin. "You don't like your neighbors to well, but you don't want to talk to a stranger about them. All right. I'll do the talking, and you listen. Did you ever hear of Rainbow Ranch?"

"Yes. I have seen the old chimneys and some broken dobe walls that are still standing. It stood in a bend of the creek, about two miles below the Box D. First ranch in the valley. Indians burned the house, and killed everybody on the place."

"That's a good story," said Vin, "but it isn't true. The ranch was settled by a man named Charley Purdom. He was doing all right until a gang of thieves and killers made up in the Wildcat Hills. Purdom owned all of Sage Valley, and he never did sell any of it. So, nobody in Sage Valley has a valid title to his land."

"How—how's that?" asked Wells.

"Very simple," Vin told him. "Your neighbor, Tuck Daveney, led the gang that murdered the Purdom family, and burned the Rainbow."

"Can you prove that?" asked Wells.

"I intend to prove it, if I am not murdered before I get the job done. I didn't come here to ask anything of you, but to warn you, and try to help you if I can. I happen to know that Tuck gave you the word today, to either throw in with him and his gang, or do the best you can. Every rancher in Sage Valley, except yourself, was a member of the gang that burned the Rainbow. Also, many of the older hands on the ranches were in that same gang. It is the same old gang today, and theft and murder is their business. One of them was killed at the Cross J last night, and before he went he told me some things that—"

"What did he tell you?" Tavy asked, eagerly.

"He told me," said Vin slowly, and looking square at Tavy now, "that Jim Wells was the only square man in Sage Valley, and that he would be bumped off as soon as Lutie Bone could marry his daughter, or found out that he couldn't get her. The fellow told me that with his dying breath, and men do not lie when they are dying. He was the one who told me that Tuck Daveney burnt the Rainbow, and admitted that he was with Tuck when it happened."

Wells and the girl fairly gasped, then sat staring at Vin in silence for a long moment. Finally, Wells broke the silence with: "Mr. Randell, I was afraid to talk to you before, but now I'm not. You look and talk like a square-shooter. I don't know what your game is, but I'm going to play it. I doped them fellers out as crooks some time ago, but there was nothing that I could do, without losing everything I have. What would you advise me to do?"

"My first advice would be for you to make up your mind which is most valuable—a few cows and horses and some land, or the lives of yourself and your daughter."

"That's already decided," declared Wells, "if we can just get out of Sage Valley before Tuck and his gang get to us."

"Fine. How many hands have you?"

"Only four at this time of the year. They are in the bunkhouse."

"Can you trust them?"

"Why, yes. Bob Holt and Joe Staley came to this section with me, and had worked for me before that. The other two are good hands that Tuck Daveney let go because he didn't need 'em, and I taken 'em on because they knew the range. They—" Wells and his daughter almost sprang from their chairs as a heavy thud fell just outside a window, and a moment later a shot crashed on the night.

"Whu—what was that?" faltered Wells.

"I don't know," said Vin. "Let's go out and see."

As they turned a corner of the house they met a man coming toward them. "This is my partner, Mr. Wells. What happened, Lark?"

"Why, just after you went into the house, two gents crope up and one goes to each window. Seems like they wanted to see and hear what was going on in the house. I wanted to take one of 'em whole, and talk to him about it, so it taken me that long to slip up to where I could hit him good. The other one runs away, and I taken a shot—listen!"

A horse was storming away down the trail, toward the Box D.

"You missed him, and he got clean away," said Vin, as he struck a match, to look at the man on the ground.

"Why, that's Pink Lea," gasped Wells. "One of my own hands."

"Sure," grinned Vin. "One of the two men that Tuck put here to spy on you. The other one will be at the Box D, telling Tuck what he heard, in a very few minutes, and Tuck won't like it. That's the answer to your question about what to do. As soon as that hombre gets to the Box D, that mob will come here and take this place apart. Five men can't hold the place against them."

By that time Bob and Joe had jerked on boots and trousers, grabbed guns, and came rolling out of the bunkhouse yelling to know what was going on. Vin told them, and they wanted to hang Pink on the spot.

"No time for that, now," said Vin. "We've got to get away from here before—Excuse me, Mr. Wells. I didn't mean to take over and ramrod your business, but I reck'n you can see what we've got to do."

"Shore I can," said Wells. "Joe, you and Bob saddle our horses. Saddle one for Pink, too. We'll take him along."

A FEW minutes later seven riders left the J W. One of them was Pink Lea. He had come out of his trance, but he was gagged, and his hands lashed to his saddlehorn. Joe led his horse, and Old Bob drove it on. They had gone about half a mile, taking a course south by east, and heading toward Wildcat Hills, when Vin called a halt: "Do you fellows know where Eagle Point is?"

"Shore," growled Bob. "They's a grove of big trees just under the point, where we can hang Pink plumb comfortable."

"That's the place. The rest of you take Pink and go on there, but don't hang him until we come. We want to see him kick at nothing."

"Where are you going?" asked Wells.

"Lark and I will stay here and watch a while," said Vin. "Them buzzards may not burn your house after all."

"All right," said Wells. "I don't know yet what yo' game is, but I'll play it, if you'll get Tavy and me out of this mess."

"Stay with me," said Vin, "and you'll go out if I go out. The best I can promise is that it's a gamble for all of us, with the odds against us and the deck stacked."

Tavy had not spoken a word since they left the J W. She didn't speak now, as Joe and Bob pushed on toward Eagle Point, and she and her father followed them.

"Well," drawled Lark, "what's the next move in this checker game? We can't watch the J W burn from here."

"We might," snapped Vin, "but we

won't. We are going back there. Any man who burns his neighbor's house ought to be killed. The only hope we have of winning this fight is to trim the Wildcats a little at a time. Come on."

A broad, deep wash ran down from Wildcat Hills, and entered Cold Water Creek just above the J W. Vin and Lark got into that draw and followed it down until they were opposite the J W. Then they ground-hitched their mounts in the shadow of a high bank and followed up a lateral that was headed almost against the J W pens. Climbing out, they crept into the shadows of the palisade fence, and stopped to wait and listen.

They had not long to wait. It was only two miles to the Box D, and the escaped spy made it in record time. He reached the place just as Daveney and his gang rode in from Twin Springs. Most of the men were still pretty well liquored, and that suited Tuck. Sober men might not want to do the job he had for them, after the spy reported. So, they had ridden right on to the J W without dismounting.

"Listen!" said Vin, as they heard the rumble of many hoofs. "There they come."

Lights were still burning in both the house and the bunkshack. Vin had left them that way, so that anyone who came to the place would think the people were still there. The mob pulled up in a long line, in front of the ranch house. There were around forty of them. For a long minute there was silence, broken only by the squeaking of leather, as a restive horse moved from time to time. Then Tuck Daveney hailed the house in his bull voice. No reply came, and he bellowed: "Come on out here, Jim. I want to talk to you some."

There was no reply to that, and Vin could hear the growling voices of two men quarreling violently. At last, Daveney roared: "Why, dang yo' fool soul, Lutie. If you wanted the gal, you had two years to get her. I told you I wouldn't clean up on Jim Wells until you either got the gal, or let her get clean away. I didn't aim to give you until judgment day to do it, and now she has got clean away. Take some of the boys, go in there, and see can you find her. The rest of you fan out, and see what you can find about the place. Maybe they are hid up somewhere."

Lutie and some of the others went to the house, knocked, got no answer, and went in. Two men rode to within fifty feet of Vin and Lark, then stopped.

"What's holding this little job up?" griped one of them.

"Why, Lutie, he don't want the house burnt," replied the other man. "He's always planned to marry the Wells gal, get Old Man Jim bumped off, then him and the gal inherit the J W, and live happy ever after. Lutie is plumb wild tonight. He thought he had a cinch on the gal, but she's gone, and he blames Tuck for it. Brother-in-law or not, Lutie is goin' to keep raunchin' until Tuck sticks a slug through him."

"He shore is," grunted the first speaker. "That little mess at the Cross J last night shot Tuck all to hell, and it ain't helped Lutie none. Willy Yarber bein' shotten thataway leaves Lutie sorta playin' a lone hand. Come on. Let's get back to the crowd. Ain't nobody about this place. They has just riz and flew. Looks like that Randell chap that Tuck keeps gripin' about had some sort of hand in this leetle eppysode."

They rode back to where Tuck Daveney sat his horse, giving orders to his men. A few moments later the windows of the house turned red. They had found a five-gallon can of kerosene, splashed it all over the house, then set fire to it. The red glare fell on the faces of Tuck and Lutie, as they sat their horses side by side, in the middle of the line, watching the result of their fiendish work.

"We won't be here long," whispered Vin. "We'll begin at the middle of the line. You work to the left and I'll work to the right, so we won't kill the same man twice. Let's go."

AT THE smack of the first shot Tuck Daveney almost jerked his head off, dodging a bullet that whined by his ear. The next moment he was trying to break the back of his horse in a short turn to get away from there. Lutie Bone was not so lucky. He went from his saddle, as the terrible scourge of lead went on sweeping the ranks. Some others died, and a number were crippled. Then just as Vin's last gun clicked empty, somebody in the mob yelled: "They are in the pens. Come on.

Let's take 'em." The infuriated mob started for the pens, throwing a heavy barrage ahead of them.

Vin and Lark reached their horses, headed up the deep wash, and were a mile from the J W before either of them spoke. They pulled up on rising ground at the edge of the hills, and looked back at the fire.

"Looks just like the Old Rainbow did," said Lark, "and the same dirty buzzards set it on fire."

"Yes," snapped Vin, "and Tuck Daveney will go to hell for doing that piece of work."

"Gents don't go to hell until they're dead," chuckled Lark. "If we run the Wildcats out'n the valley, they'll just go back into the hills, and go on working on the valley, like they did in the old days. I reck'n what we have did tonight has helped Jim Wells and his gal some, but it hasn't did us much good. We have took some raw meat right out'n the claws of a gang of tigers, and they are goin' to bite and scratch. They still have Tuck to lead 'em. Looks like he can't be kilt. I know we both shot at him, in a good light."

"They won't have Tuck to lead 'em," said Vin. "Next time I see Tuck Daveney I'm going to call him, right up close to his whiskers."

It was growing gray in the east when Vin and Lark found the others in the grove just under Eagle Point. Wells and his daughter had seen the glow of their burning home, and now they were frantic to get out of Sage Valley with their lives. The gag was removed from Pink's mouth, and he tried to talk himself out of a noose, by telling everything he knew, which was no more than Vin already knew. It did no good. Vin took Wells and the girl and led on into the hills. When Lark and the two old punchers caught up with them, Tavy said "Where is Pink?"

"He got plumb away," drawled Lark, and that closed the incident.

Morning found them in the hidden cave. They had plenty of food, and could sleep through the day if they wanted to. The others slept soundly, but Vin woke after sleeping a few hours, and crept noiselessly out of the cave. He thought Lark was overconfident about no one being able to find that hiding-place. It was long after noon when he sat down on a flat rock, near a little spring that broke out of the bluff on the right side of the gorge as he looked down it. He had been there but a few moments, when he heard a light step on the rocks behind him, glanced around and saw Tavy Wells approaching him. He went on looking down the gorge, though why no one could have told. A hundred feet below where he sat the canyon made a sharp turn, and just at the turn there was a pile of boulders that had fallen from the high bluff. There was nothing to be seen beyond that. Tavy stopped within a few feet of him: "Vin, I must talk to you."

"All right," he replied, without looking at her. "Take a seat."

The rock on which Vin sat was about two feet wide by four long, and one end of it was against the bluff to his right. It was like one of these queer tete-a-tete chairs, or lover's seats, only there was no back to it. Tavy sat down, facing back toward the cave. She could see Vin's face that way. Still he didn't look at her, but kept right on looking down the gorge.

"Vin, I want to thank you for not letting Dad know that I went to the Cross J to warn you. It was a foolish thing to do, and maybe you won't understand. Just after we came to Sage Valley my mother died, and I have been on my own."

"I think I can understand," Vin said, gravely. "My mother was—she died when I was ten, and I have been on my own."

"I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't mean to bring up sad memories. What I was going to say was that I have tried to be fair with Dad. I have told him most things, but he didn't know that Lutie Bone wanted to marry me, until you told him. I never did like Lutie. When I slipped off and came to the Cross J, I did think it was a good joke on him to send him snipe-hunting, after all his bold, arrogant talk about what he was going to do to the rustlers, but—back of that I had a more serious idea."

"What was it?" asked Vin, still looking down the gorge.

"Several men have been shot or hanged since we have been here, by other ranchmen. They said the men were rustlers, but Dad would have nothing to do with it. I have a horror of such things, and I thought I might save a human life by going to the Cross J and warning you."

"It is quite probable that you saved my life," said Vin. "Do you mean to say that you wouldn't kill a man who was trying to kill you, if you could kill him?"

"No one has ever tried to kill me, and I don't think—"

VIN'S GUN was on his left side, with the handle forward, lying between him and the girl. Suddenly his right hand moved like the head of a striking snake, and his gun swished out of the holster. Tavy heard three shots, distinctly. She heard something else. It was the whine of a glancing bullet, and it had passed very near her. She didn't move. Fright rendered her unable to move for a moment. She stared at Vin, and saw him calmly throw out two empties and replace them with fresh cartridges, then slip his gun back into the holster. Crazily, she wondered why he didn't load the other chamber, for she had heard three shots, fired quicker than she had ever seen any man fire before.

Vin pointed down at the rock between them. She looked, and there was a long cut in her skirt as it lay on the stone. She moved over and disclosed a long blue mark on the surface of the rock. "What—what is that?" she faltered.

"A bullet track," he replied. "Somebody tried to kill you, but you won't have to kill him. He's behind that pile of rocks down there."

Just then the other four men came running out of the cave. Tavy had got her nerves back in place, and she said in a low tone: "You said I saved your life, and now you have saved mine. That makes us even."

"Even, but not quite—I hope," said Vin, and now he was looking square into her brown eyes.

"What's going on out here?" demanded Jim Wells.

"There's a man behind that pile of rocks," said Vin, and he pointed to the heap of boulders. "Let's take a look at him."

They went to the pile of boulders, but there was no man behind them, and Wells said: "Seeing things, I reck'n."

"I see something," growled Old Lark, as he pointed to a great pool of blood on the ground, and a trail of blood leading away from it and on around the bend in the gorge. They followed on for another hundred feet and found the man. He had crawled that far in an effort to escape, but couldn't make it.

"Why, that's Skeets Hollis, the other one of my hands," said Jim Wells. "What are you doing here, Skeet?"

"You know what I'm doin' here," gasped Skeet. "After that mess at the J W last night, I started out to find Pink Lea, and I found his carcass on a limb. Then I struck the trail of you fellers and follered yuh. I aimed to pick you off as you comes out, but—"

"But you didn't," said Vin. "Was Tuck Daveney killed or crippled in that mess at the J W last night?"

"No, he weren't touched, and you killers had better be sorry of it. You've trimmed Tuck's gang some, and he'll have to go slow for a few days, but he can get plenty more, and when he do—"

Skeet didn't say what would happen. He was through saying anything. He had leaked all the blood that was in him and just died. They carried his body outside the gorge, threw it into a narrow crevice and pushed gravel in on top of it—a much cleaner, better burial than he was entitled to. Then they went back to the cave. It was late afternoon, and already the shadows were deepening in the gorge. Tavy had gone into the cave, and the five men stood together talking.

"I want to ride out of this place, and clean out of the country, right now," said Wells. "Skeet said Tuck could get more killers, and I know he can. These Wildcat Hills are full of them."

"Yes," admitted Vin, "and some day these old hills are going to be taken to the cleaner, right. If we ride out there now, we're apt to ride into a trap. It is not likely that Skeet followed us by himself. I think he just got a little too far ahead of his gang, got lost from them, and kept following the trail, meaning to locate us, then go back and get help. When he looked over those rocks and saw me looking at him he knew he had to do something, so he fired one shot, and—that was all."

"I hadn't thought of that," said Wells.

"I had," Vin told him. "You said you would follow my lead and stay with me if I would get you and your daughter out of the mess. If I'm leading the deal, I want to know it, now."

"It's your lead," said Wells, humbly. "I was just so skeered for Tavy that I couldn't think of anything else."

"All right," rasped Vin. "There's four of you. Let everybody stay in the cave, except one man to watch and listen. You can hold this place against an army. You have enough cartridges to kill all the men Tuck Daveney has, or can get. So, get set. I'm going out of here and scout a bit. If the way is clear, we'll all ride out before morning. If I am not back by daylight, I won't be back, and you can do what you think best." Wells and his two men entered the cave.

"Now, see here, Vin," said Lark. "When I said I'd foller you through hell and back, I meant just that. No tellin' what you'll run into out there, and—"

"I know it, Lark," Vin said, with a note of deep affection in his voice, "but here's the lay. Jim Wells is a good man, but he is not a fighter. Joe and Bob will fight, but they need somebody to show 'em how to fight. You can do more for me by staying here, than you could ever do in any other way. There's something in that cave that is worth fighting and dying for."

"I getcha," growled Lark, "and if anybody pesters her he'll think he has been through hell. I'll stay, but if you don't come back by morning, I'll get me a gang and take these damned gopher mounds apart and fix 'em. I'll put Sage Valley back like it was when the Injuns first found it."

Vin led his saddled horse out of the cave stable. Lark was standing where he had left him. Neither of them spoke. They gripped hands, Vin swung to his saddle, and Lark stood watching sparks fly from the iron-shod hoofs of Vin's horse until it turned the bend in the gorge and went out of sight. Then the faithful old puncher went to the job of protecting Tavy Wells, as he had promised to do.

THE ATTEMPT to murder Tavy Wells, and what Vin had seen in her brown eyes afterward, had changed the whole course of events for him. Up to that time he had wondered if the game he was playing was worth the candle. His desire for what was his own had been very strong, but not as strong as the desire that he now felt for something that was not his own, and that he might not be able to win. If he couldn't have Tavy, he didn't want Sage Valley. He had killed the man who had tried to kill her, and he meant to kill the man who had tried to barter her as a chattel. There was little danger that anybody would attack the hide-out at night, and he could have taken Lark with him, but he was on a dangerous mission. He loved Lark as a son loves his father. Then too, if he didn't come back, Lark could get Tavy and her father out of the clutches of Tuck Daveney.

At the mouth of the short gorge, Vin climbed out onto the wild escarpment of hills, and headed south for Twin Springs. He was going to bet his last chip against a deck that he knew was stacked against him. There could be no peace of mind for him until he faced Tuck Daveney in a cold showdown.

Mike Grogan sat in his tiny den at the back of the shop, a little while after nightfall. There was not much that happened in the town, or the country close about, that Mike didn't learn by the simple process of keeping his mouth shut, and his eyes and ears open. In that way he had learned that Jake Toombs had exhausted his stock of coffins that day, and was at that moment working his hammer overtime, as he finished another one for future trade, which promised to be brisk. Mike was putting together what he had heard, and pulling at his old black pipe, when he heard the front door open softly, and a careful step come on through the shop. He opened the door, and Vin stepped into the den. "Out of grub already?" asked Mike.

"No," replied Vin. "Are there any women at the Box D ranch?"

"No," grunted Mike. "Tuck's wife died ten year ago, and he ain't never married again. It's a stag ranch. Not a woman about the place."

"Fine. I'm going out there, and I don't want to kill a woman if I can help it."

"Been eatin' loco weed, aincha?" jeered Mike. "What are you going to the Box D for?"

"I'm goin' to kill Tuck Daveney, or he's going to kill me—if he can. I want a showdown with him, and I aim to have it tonight."

"I got to talk to you some more, Vin," said the old boot-maker, thoughtfully pulling at his old black pipe. "What's happened to you? When you comes in here the other day you was just a sorta care-free boy, happy as a lark and willing to try anything once. You looked like a boy, with a smooth, untroubled face. Now, your face is drawn and lined, like a middle-aged man with plenty of worries. What's happened?"

"Nothing that you could do anything about," said Vin, as he rose. "I'm going now."

"Wait a minute," begged Mike. "There's something that I haven't told you about Sage Valley. There's four good sized ranches in there, besides the Jim Wells outfit. The Box D is the biggest one, and Giff Keener's Lazy K is the next. Then there's Mont Beaver and Ken Petty. Tuck is bull of the woods, and Giff is second. The other two just legs for them. Them four men are the toughest gun-slingin' hellions in Sage Valley, or anywhere else in the world."

"So what?" said Vin.

He checked his impatience.

"So this—if you happen to jump them four men in a bunch, you haven't got as much chance as a three-legged bull in a hawss race. You knocked Tuck Daveney kickin' with your first, when he wasn't looking. Next time, he'll be lookin', and he'll be smokin' as soon as he sees you. You don't have to go to the Box D to find Tuck. Him and Giff, and the other two, are in the Wildcat right now. I was in there a while about sundown. They was holding a plumb lodge of sorrow, and cussin' something awful. 'Pears like some sort of sickness has broke out among their hands. Then what they had left let out a yell that the wrath to come had settled on Sage Valley, and most of 'em just riz and flew. So, you can see that them four gents ain't in no humor to be polite to nobody."

Vin rose and handed a wallet to Mike: "There's five hundred in that," he said. "It'll pay my funeral expenses, if I have to be buried. If not—" Vin turned and left the shop. Mike heard the front door close softly, and said to himself: "Thorobred hoofs in hell, or will be in about two minutes." Then he stole to the front door to listen.

BUCK DAVENEY had the floor in the Wildcat and was making a speech. He had his three satellites and Sam Skinner for an audience, and was telling them what he meant to do to the gang of killers who were interfering with his business. Sam was grinning from ear to ear, like a Japanese idol. Suddenly his expression changed, and the mustache fell from over one ear as he jerked his head toward the door. They all looked that way and froze in their tracks. Vin stood just inside the door with a gun in each hand. There was not a chance for them to make a play without at least one or two of them being killed.

"All right, Tuck," rasped Vin. "I'm going to tell you who I am, and why I am going to do it, and then I'm going to kill you. Vin Purdom, Charley Purdom's son. I was not in the house the night you set the Rainbow on fire. I was—"

"It's a lie," said Tuck. He thought he was roaring the statement, but his voice was weak with fear.

"Oh, no it isn't," jeered Vin. "I got the straight dope on the whole thing, and have just been waiting until you took the hook and went clean under. You say a smoke title won't hold in Sage Valley. You ought to know. That's the only kind of title you have ever had. Now, I'm going to find if my smoke title will hold. Draw, damn you. I don't want to kill you like the dog you are."

And he jammed his irons back into their holsters.

Sensing that Vin meant to give them a break, the four desperate men went for their guns. Vin stepped swiftly forward, until he was almost toe to toe with Tuck Daveney. As their guns cleared leather, Vin fired two shots. One of them literally singed Tuck's whiskers, as the bullet passed through his head. Vin's other bullet took Mont Beaver apart, and laid him on the floor ready to be cleaned and oiled. Giff Keener and Ken Petty both fired too quick, and missed. Before Ken could fire again, one of Vin's bullets caught him and put him out of the game. The next second, one of Giff's slugs plowed along the side of Vin's head, and he went down, but not until he had fired the shot that took part of Giff's head away.

The war being over, Mike Grogan headed for the Wildcat, and ran into Jake Toombs, who was seeking a tenant for the coffin that he had just finished. Half a dozen others met them at the saloon door, and Sam Skinner yelled: "Come on, fellers, and help me drag this mess out of here." Sam turned back toward the shambles, then stopped and stared. One of them had come to life!

"Drag these buzzards out," said Vin, as he sat up on the floor with a gun in his hand, and shook the blood out of his eyes.

Mike Grogan got to Vin, saw that the bullet had barely cut through the skin for an inch, but had knocked Vin out, and set to work. He grabbed a bottle of alcohol, washed the wound with it, and bound it up with a handkerchief. A moment later, as he stood looking down at the bodies on the floor, Vin said: "That makes five of the buzzards who burned the Old Rainbow. If there is any more of 'em in this section, they ought to move, pronto." Then he turned and left the place.

"Who is that gent, Mike?" asked Sam.

"Dunno," grunted Mike. "Looks some like Old Man Charley Purdom." Then Mike followed Vin, and left Sam wondering if he had not better get what he could for the Wildcat, and get out of town. He had been with Tuck at the Rainbow that night.

Vin was about to mount his horse, when Mike called to him: "Hold on, Vin. Here's yo' wallet."

"Better keep it," said Vin. "You might want to buy some leather. I've got everything I want—almost."

Vin's head still ached a little, but he didn't think of it. He spurred on to the hide-out, dismounted and entered the cave.

"What's the matter with your head, Vin?" Tavy asked.

"Horse stumbled and fell with me," lied Vin. "Poked my head agin a rock, and skinned it some. Everybody saddle up. We are going to ride from here."

"Where to?" they chorused.

"To the Box D. I own it, lock, stock, and barrel."

Lark noted the happy lilt in Vin's voice, and got him away from the others for a moment. "What happened?" he snapped. "Out with it." Vin told him, briefly, and he went on: "Why, damn yo' ornery little hide. I'd orto take a wet rope to—excuse me, boss. It's yo' lead. Let's get goin'."

THEY TOOK over the Box D in the dead of night. There was not a human being about the place when they arrived. Somebody had carried the news from Twin Springs to the ranches. By daylight next morning Sage Valley was very much as the Indians had found it, except for six people who were eating breakfast at the Box D.

It was afternoon of that wonderful day when Vin said: "Tavy, I'd like for you to take a little ride with me."

Lark and Jim Wells watched them ride away down Cold Water Creek: "Do you reck'n they are safe?" asked Wells.

"Yep," grinned Lark. "I don't think anybody in Sage Valley is apt to jump Vin, in the humor he is in right now."

They pulled up near the old chimneys and weed-grown bits of broken-dobe walls, where the Rainbow once had stood. Vin pointed to it and said: "That is where I was born."

"Where you were born!" said Tavy. "I—I thought you were just a drifter."

"I was, but I don't intend to drift any more—I hope. I have not been here for fifteen years, and I want to look for something. Will you help me?"

About half a mile from the ruins, they found the little cave. Vin entered it and found the box. When he came out, holding the box behind him, Tavy said: "Did you find what you wanted?"

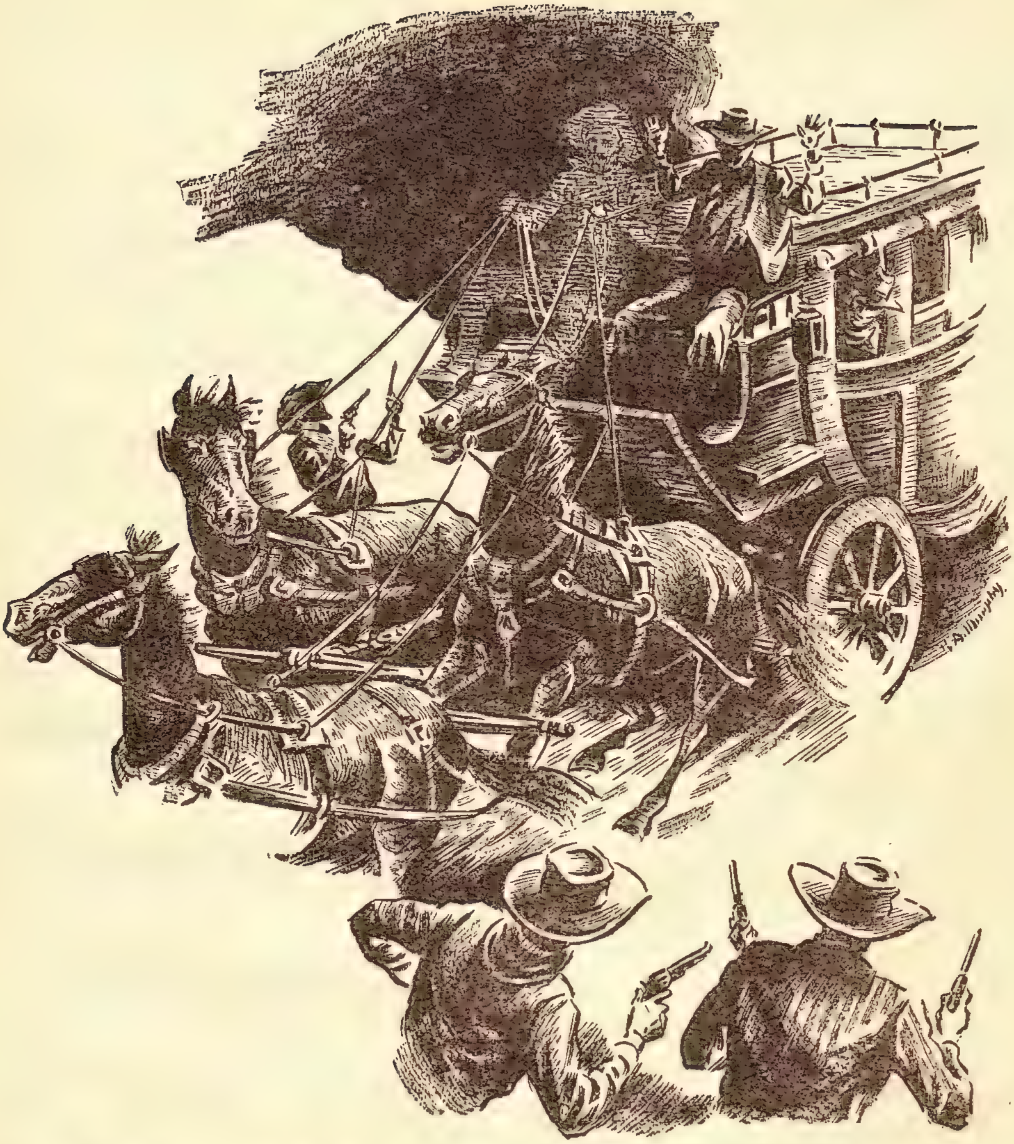
"Not everything," he replied, gravely. "I have not found the most important thing. Maybe you'll help me find it."

"I? Whu—how—what is it?"

"Happiness, and a home with the only woman I ever wanted," said Vin. "When that buzzard tried to kill you yesterday, I knew that I loved you more than anything else on earth."

"And I loved you before that," said Tavy, as she slipped into his arms.

When they returned to the Box D, Vin told Jim Wells his story, and the contents of that old tin box backed it up. Then he and Tavy told their own wonderful story. Lark was present and heard it all. Then he said to himself as he looked at Vin's wonderful boots: "Them Thorobred Hoofs have been in Hell, all right, but—they're in Heaven, now."



THE HAUNTED STAGE

By CHARLES D. RICHARDSON, Jr.

Driverless, the coach roared over the Cranberry road — while its passengers played a death-game.

"SOMEBODY stop the stage! There's no one driving it!"

The exclamation came from the lean old lady bouncing around on the seat inside the swaying coach. Opposite her and building his cigarette with difficulty, gunman Ott Connor gave a grunt. Hysterical dame, with an imagination gone haywire, he thought. Connor slid the quirly spike between his lips and thrust his head out the window.

One look proved the elderly woman to be right. On the left side of the driver's seat, the shotgun guard, Billy Brisk, perched. Just sat there, gun across knees, and watched the sagebrush scoot past. The four-horse team galloped along at a lively pace, slapping reins looped about the whip holder.

Of the stage driver himself, not a trace!

Ott Connor drew in his head. "The damn fool." He made as if to open the door.

A hand fell on his arm. It was Parson Drew, sitting with the elderly Miss Meech.

"We," the parson said quietly. "are in no danger, really. The horses are trained. They know every inch of the way to Cranberry Bend."

The coach struck a rock, swayed and tossed the occupants about. Ott Connor released a puff of smoke. "Fool stunt. No driver. What's preventing the guard taking over?"

A head appeared, upside down, in the window. Billy Brisk, the guard, wore a growth of sandy hair on his face that made him resemble a thistle burr.

"I heard what you said, young fella," he snapped, "And it's not true. Can't y'see Old Axel up here, poppin' that there team? Axel's driv them broncs through hell and high water for over thirty years, an' he's gonna keep right on drivin' 'em. Never missed a schedule. Better mind your tongue, fella. I got me ears like a fox."

He drew his sandy head, turtlelike, up out of sight.

Old Miss Meech shifted her billowing black skirt indignantly. "Well, I never!"

The short, stout gent beside Connor licked his full lips. "It's an outrage. I shall see the authorities when we get in town."

Parson Drew gave a little smile. A sanctimonious softy, Ott Connor judged swiftly. "We shouldn't," the parson said, "be too hasty. Perhaps I had better explain. Old Axel Winters, the former driver, died a short time ago. He was a remarkable driver. Lived, ate, slept with his horses. He trained them painstakingly, patiently, to obey his every word. He got them to mind as no other stage team ever minded. He had a name for each, and talked to them as if they were his children. He would feed them, rub them down before he ate or slept himself. The animals adored him."

The parson was staring out over the gliding prairie.

"Billy Brisk has ridden guard for heaven knows how long. He loved Old Axel as a brother. When Old Axel died, Billy was the one to catch the last words. They were: 'Don't worry about the stage. I'll carry on, like I always have.'

"Gentlemen, believe it or not, that's exactly what happened. The team continued to pull the stage, as though Old Axel Winters were still in the driver's seat. Still popping the reins with his gnarled old hands. Billy Brisk took it as a matter of course. He wouldn't permit anyone to take over the reins, and the stageline heads had to humor him. Billy Brisk has never failed to keep the stage free of highwaymen. And the team brought the coach through safely every trip."

The little man beside Connor jerked. "Parson," he said, "If you weren't representing the church, I'd call you a liar. A stage without a driver— It's preposterous, unbelievable. An — an outrage, sir!"

The parson kept his eyes on the prairie. "Nevertheless, we seem to be getting along all right. Without a driver."

Miss Emily Meech gave a snort. She looked a bit pale, but too stubborn to admit it.

"Mr. Leaven is right. We'll all probably end up at the bottom of some gully, horribly mangled." She began gnawing on her small, lace handkerchief.

OTT CONNOR, gunman, grimaced at the sound of the name. He glanced at the small man at his right. Beaker Leaven was the man he was out today to kill. The gunman's eyes studied the nattily-dressed storekeeper's fat face, and the events of the past year snapped grimly before his mind. Beaker Leaven had been the cause of Dean Connor's death. Ott, away on business at the time, hadn't learned of his father's illness till late. Dean Connor had fallen from a wild mustang and needed an operation quickly. He had appealed to Beaker Leaven for the necessary funds to cover the surgeon's fees. Beaker Leaven had money, plenty. But Leaven had refused. "A bad bet," he'd said, meaning that old Dean probably would never pay him back. And due to the delay, Dean Connor had died.

Murdered by Beaker Leaven, just as surely as though the latter had thrust a knife in his back.

All this, Ott Connor had learned from a neighbor. From then on, Connor lived for one thing—to kill Beaker Leaven, shoot the snake's guts until they'd stopped squirming. Ott's gunpull—heretofore impatient enough with gents who invited it—became deadly. Men avoided him, with good reason.

He had never met Leaven until today. Investigating, he had learned of Leaven's proposed trip to Cranberry Bend, and acted accordingly. Somewhere, along the trip, Ott Connor would blast hell out of the storeowner.

The rear wheel gave a lurch and the gunman cursed. He wished he were alone with Leaven. Jittery old maid and straight-laced parson—flies in the ointment. "The Lord works in mysterious ways," Drew had said, referring to the driverless coach, and Ott Connor sneered. He needed no help from God to settle Beaker Leaven. Let the Lord tend to his own business, Connor would take care of his.

He had no time for any kind of religion.

They were speeding down a sloping avenue of spruce trees now. It got dark, as if a giant palm suddenly had thrust itself between them and the sky. This was the famous "Hangman's Hollow" the old timers spieled about from their rockers. Six men and two women had met death here, from outlaw slugs. The outlaws finally had been caught, hung, but that didn't discourage others from trying likewise. Ott Connor wasn't at all surprised when a curt, "Reach for it!" clipped from somewhere to the left outside.

The stage groaned to a stop. Miss Meech screamed, and the parson put a protective arm about her. Beaker Leaven cowered in the corner of his seat, trembling.

Ott Connor drew his gun and waited for the bandits to approach.

Up on the driver's seat, Billy Brisk was cursing a blue streak. It was the first time any highwayman had caught him napping. The bandits had leaped from the bushes as Billy was dozing. The old fellow wasn't so young and tired quickly.

"Dammit to hell!" he chattered. "Axel, you gotta do something, pronto. Them gunnies ain't gonna bust our record. No holdups for *this* stage. Gotta stop 'em!"

Peering cautiously, Connor saw one of the bandits approach. "Are you loco?" the outlaw said, gripping his gun. "There ain't no damn driver up there. What happened to him? Look around in the bushes, fellows. May be a trick."

Old Billy Brisk glowered. But he kept his hands respectfully away from the gun at his feet. "Old Axel'll show yuh."

Connor was about to let the nearest outlaw have it, when the driverless team gave a sudden forward lurch. They plunged straight at the bandits, scattering them like tenpins. A couple of the men fired wildly, but Billy Brisk had his shotgun working and the woods echoed with its thunder. Two of the bandits fell, Connor accounting for a third. The next moment all were hidden from sight.

The four snorting horses whisked the stage on into the darkness.

Billy Brisk gave a triumphant bellow: "That's showin' 'em, Axel, ol' cuss!"

Inside, the storeowner, Beaker Leaven, mopped his pale forehead. "Just coincidence," he gasped. "The animals—were startled. They leaped ahead—from fright."

The parson nodded. "Axel Winters couldn't have been responsible. He's dead."

Miss Emily Meech's voice staggered up from the depths of her buzzard-like neck.

"Y-yes," she whispered. "He-he's dead."

Gunman Ott Connor drew thoughtfully on his smoke. He holstered his sixgun.

It had started to rain. Not one of those mild showers which lays the alkali dust and leaves the trees and grass and white azalea blossoms fresh and sweet-smelling. It was a grim rain, straight down and pounding. A score of puddles formed in the road surface and the wagon ruts became tiny rivers. Lightning barbs jagged in the east. It became dark as pitch.

Mad thoughts ran riot in the brain of Ott Connor. He was wondering why in hell he hadn't seized the opportunity the hold-up presented to make an end of the murderer of his father. In the confusion, shots, men and horses bawling, he easily could have put a slug between the ribs of storeman Leaven, leaving the blame on the bandits. But Connor guessed it was because he liked an open fight. There'd be other chances.

Leaven was huddled in his corner. At each blinding flare outside, he shook perceptibly, as with the ague. Yellow as jaundice, gunman Connor opined. Leaven was known to carry a concealed derringer for protective purposes. A man with wealth had to be careful. And Beaker Leaven had shot one gent down already, in the back. He claimed that the other had been out to rob him. There were many who questioned that. Leaven had hated the guts of the man he'd killed.

It had been easy, in the case of Dean Connor, to remove the object of dislike. Just let him die, from want of succor.

Ott Connor would have to think of some way to get Beaker Leaven to go for that derringer.

The road outside had become a sea of dirty soup. Old Billy Brisk huddled on the high seat, water trickling from the brim of his droopy hat. The horses trotted on, driverless, in the beating rain.

The stage gave a sickening lurch, stopped. It settled to the hubs of the rear wheels in thick mud. Straining mightily, the team strove to budge the carriage. They failed.

The left rear horse turned its head and whinnied.

Connor followed Billy Brisk to the ground. Their boots sank in the muck when they reached the rear wheels. Billy Brisk gave a dark curse. In the intermittent lightning flares, you could see it was a mess. "That," the gunguard rasped, "Wasn't here the last time we made the run. Caved-in gopher hole, I reckon. Well, me an' Axel'll fix it."

The old fellow pulled a couple of boards from beneath the stage. These he wedged under the sunken wheels. As he worked, Miss Emily Meech came out, with a smoking lantern.

"We found this inside," she said in her shrill voice, "And thought maybe it would help. Black as my sister Ophelia's cat out here." She directed the light rays on the wheels.

Parson Drew stepped down and asked if he could be of assistance. Beaker Leaven remained in the dryness of the stage's interior.

Finally, Billy Brisk straightened. He rubbed his wet forehead.

"I figger," he said, "If we get behind and shove, the team can haul us out now. Let's give 'er a try, anyhow."

All of the horses were looking back, ears tilted. When Brisk, Connor, and the Parson laid their shoulders against the stage, they snorted, moved forward. Their powerful leg muscles rippled. No one had called, "Giddap!" But they moved.

The heavy stage rolled out of the muck with a sucking sound.

"That's the ticket, Axel!" yelled old Billy Brisk.

Everyone piled back into the stage, and the team plodded on.

THE rain was slackening. Thick clouds, however, cloaked the sky, and it was yet like night. Ott Connor wondered how in hell those animals could find their way along the soaked road. Risky as the devil. Connor had a half notion to get up there and take the reins. It was, of course, absurd to assume that the deceased Axel Winters still was helping. You died, folks forgot you in time, and that was the end to it. Everything had an end, eventually.

Connor shifted the gun at his hip and wondered at the change. The Parson didn't seem a bad sort, even the old floozie had pitched in and helped. Leaven had made himself scarce, as expected. The gunman wondered if Beaker would scream when he was plugged.

Half an hour passed and a dense fog sprang up. So dense it rolled along in gobs. Miss Meech still had the lantern, and she looked tired. The light showed up only a few feet. Parson Drew's calm face glowed dimly in the feeble rays. Ott Connor thought of the long, steep trail they now were sliding over, and he gave an involuntary shiver.

He tried to engage the storeman in conversation, but Leaven wasn't over-responsive. Carelessly, Connor mentioned his father's death, avoiding reference to the fact that he himself was the son. He told Leaven that he had heard that the son was holding him responsible. Was out to square things for good.

Beaker Leaven's fat face went a shade paler. His pudgy hand quivered on his knee. "I don't know what you mean," he said hoarsely. "I had nothing to do with Connor's death. You have been misinformed."

Connor said nothing to that, but in the fog veil he smiled, grimly. Get the skunk scared enough and he would pull his gun, to save his hide. One pull was all the excuse Ott Connor needed.

Of a sudden the stage and blowing team halted. For the first time on the trip, old Billy Brisk hollered at them. He yelled at the invisible Axel to pop the reins, get them going. He even finally took the reins in his own hands, gave them an impatient slap. But the horses remained unmoving. They looked back reproachfully at the little gunguard.

Billy Brisk jumped to the road. "I shouldn't ought to've done that," he mumbled, studying the four wheels resting on solid dirt. "Old Axel'll be hurted. He's a reason for stoppin' that team here."

The passengers piled out. "I demand," storeman Leaven shrilled, "That you get back up on that seat and drive on. No reason why we cannot continue. The road's clear, no mud. I've got to reach town before midnight, you hear."

"I hear you bellerin'," said old Billy Brisk, "but I ain't mindin' it none. We don't leave here until them horses is good and ready."

Emily Meech was glaring at the storeman. "There must be a reason."

Parson Drew had walked ahead aways with the lantern. Connor heard him give a short gasp. "Gentlemen! Come here, slowly, about a dozen yards. Stop immediately when you see the light."

Billy Brisk, Connor, and the rest did as directed. When they stood beside the tall minister, their gaze followed his pointing finger. It pointed at the road bed a few feet beyond. Emily gave a shriek.

Ott Connor, hardened gunman, said softly: "My God!"

Before them stretched a bridge, the long, wooden bridge which spanned Pine Canyon. That is, a part of it did. Only about ten feet of platform, railing, then—nothing. The rest of the structure lay somewhere a half-mile below, at the bottom of the canyon. Splintered to matchwood by the storm and the resulting fall from the dizzy height.

And the team had halted a short piece from the edge.

Billy Brisk let out a whoop. "Good ol' Axel never lets you down!"

Parson Drew lowered his head. "Nor the good Lord. Amen."

"Amen!" agreed Miss Meech, fervently.

Gunman Ott Connor watched the horses back the stage to a widening in the road, turn completely about. Connor and the rest would have to sleep in the vehicle until dawn, then go back to the old Indian trail which cut around the canyon. A longer way, but it eventually would get them to town, Billy Brisk assured them.

Connor looked again at the white face of the storeowner, Beaker Leaven, the man Ott had come to kill. Leaven's chest was rising and falling rapidly, and he continually was wetting his lips. Nerves like taut piano wire. Connor heard him mutter once, "Can't get me for that, damn him. Ain't fair!" and Connor smiled slowly. He knew what was happening to Beaker Leaven.

The gunman got into the stage. It suddenly had burst over him, like a searchlight through the choking fog. He knew now that he would never have to kill Beaker Leaven. Old Dean, his father, even now was being avenged. Leaven's thoughts, from which he could not escape, would punish him. The thoughts that he had done a wrong, and that the son of the man he had wronged was looking for him with a gun. It would hound Leaven to his grave.

Best to leave the meting of justice to God — funny, Connor opined, how His name now seemed to have a meaning—and Old Axel Winters. They had managed pretty fair with the stage and team so far. They should be able to handle a proposition like Beaker Leaven.

"The Lord," gunman Ott Connor reflected inwardly, as he built himself a smoke, "works in mysterious ways."

SMOKE KILLER

By CLIFFORD D. SIMAK

Morgan could afford to be reckless. Pegged as a killer; a necktie party on his trail—he meant to even the count in one desperate gamble.

DANNY MORGAN found Jack Harris in the coulee back of the shanty.

Someone had shot Harris straight between the eyes and he lay on his back, one leg bent under him and his arms thrown wide, as if a giant hand had slapped him backward violently. Harris' gun still was in its holster. His eyes stared at the silent sky. His mouth sagged as if, before he died, he'd had time to be surprised.

Morgan's hands lifted to his gun butts, then dropped away. There was, he realized, no further danger now. The man on the ground had been killed hours, probably days before. Probably shortly after Morgan had left for Butte City.

Slowly, Morgan glanced around. The prairie swells marched in serried ranks to the high horizon that hemmed in the bowl that held the spread. And the bowl was empty, empty to the sun and little gusts of wind that puffed and eddied down the coulees. Nothing stirred within it, no sign of life at all. The cattle would be down in the brakes, at the lower end of the ranch.

Up ahead, jutting out of the coulee's side was a jumbled ledge of broken rocks. Morgan's eyes narrowed, hard in the bright sunlight. Those rocks were the only cover anywhere nearby, were within easy rifle shot.

He walked up the coulee, climbed to the cluster of boulders. On the slope just below the rocks lay something white . . . a cigarette, half burned, unconsumed tobacco spilling from the paper. A man sitting in the rocks above could have flipped it there.

Among the boulders Morgan found other stubs. All of them half smoked. Someone, obviously, had squatted there, nervously puffing while he waited.

Crouched among the rocks, the ranchman stared back down the coulee to where the body of his partner lay. A tenderfoot couldn't have missed a shot like that.

A tiny breeze, hot in the midday sun, stirred down the coulee, fluttering something that lay within the shadow. Morgan reached out his hand. It was a tobacco sack, turned inside out, as if the man who had waited there had been determined to get out of it the last shred of leaf.

Staring at the sack, Morgan tried to marshal his thoughts.

Jack Harris had had his moments of bad temper, his sullen days, but he was not a trouble maker, he got along well with the folks he met. Morgan racked his brains for some enemy Harris might have had, could think of no one.

Could the killer have been someone from out of Harris' past? Someone who finally hunted him down? Something that finally caught up with him?

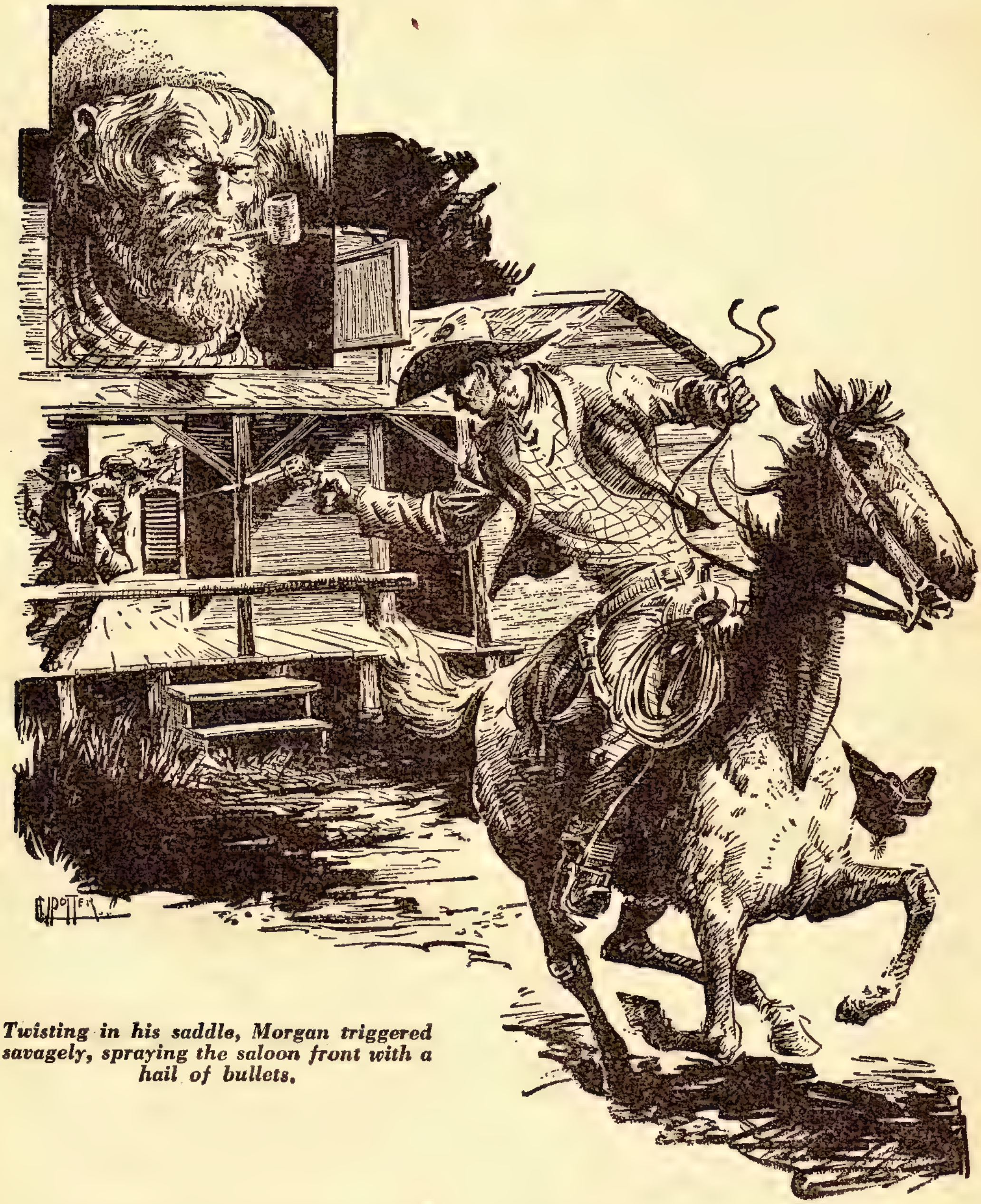
That, pondered Morgan, might have been the reason Jack had been so anxious to sell out. Although the last winter had been enough to make anyone want to sell, with more than half the cattle gone before the spring thaw came. Although it hadn't hit them any worse, perhaps not as hard, as it had hit some others. The Diamond C, Jay Crawford's big ranch just to the south, had lost more than 20,000 head.

A horse nickered from the shanty. Probably Harris' horse, still standing just as Morgan had found him, saddled and bridled, waiting with drooping head outside the shanty door. Almost as if he knew his master was dead.

Then Morgan saw the riders, three of them, coming up the draw, the horses picking their way through the grove of cottonwoods that grew above the spring.

Morgan clambered down the hill, walked down the coulee and waited beside the dead man until the three drew rein.

"Howdy, sheriff," said Morgan. "Just fixing to ride in and see you."



Twisting in his saddle, Morgan triggered savagely, spraying the saloon front with a hail of bullets.

The burly sheriff sat his horse easily, carelessly, stared down at Harris' body. Morgan nodded to the other two. One of them was Harry Kress, the sheriff's deputy, the other Hank Fridley, Diamond C foreman. They nodded, saying nothing.

"What do you know about this, Danny?" the sheriff asked.

"Not a thing," said Morgan. "I just found him. Not more than an hour ago. The sidewinder that done it hid out in them rocks up there."

The sheriff nodded. "How come you didn't find him until just now?" he demanded. "From the looks of him, he's been dead for quite a long spell, I'd say."

"I just got back. I started out for Butte City a week ago."

The sheriff looked at him sharply. "You and Jack have another fight?" he asked.

"We had some words," admitted Morgan. "Crawford made us an offer for the spread and Jack wanted to sell. I wanted to hang on. Upshot of it was I left for Butte City to try to raise the money to buy out his share."

The sheriff slid from his horse, waddled over to the body.

"Clean a piece of work as I ever see." He stared at Morgan solemnly. "How come you took so long to Butte City and back? Go on a little toot?"

"I never got to Butte City," said Morgan. "End of the first day out, my hoss got snake-bit. Had to hole up beside the creek for a while and wait till he could travel. Then I hoofed it back here, leading him. Took me three days to make it."

"You mean you never did get to Butte City? All this time you been sittin' out on the prairie, takin' care of a snake-bit hoss?"

Morgan flared angrily. "Just what are you trying to say, sheriff?"

The deputy laughed. "Don't monkey around with him no more, Fred. Go ahead and tell him what you got on your mind."

For a moment silence struck and froze them where they stood, with not a single one of them moving a muscle.

Then the deputy spoke. "I wouldn't go for them guns if I was you, Danny." Fridley laughed softly.

"You're all plumb loco," yelled Morgan. "Why would I kill Jack? Him and me was partners. Why we . . ."

"Shut your trap," said the sheriff, "and wave your paws. I'm going to take your guns."

"Someday," declared Morgan, "I'll just naturally gut-shoot all three of you for this."

"You better hurry, then," said Kress, mockingly. "Because it won't be long before you'll be stretching hemp."

FROM the tiny window in the rear of the jail, Morgan stared out over the crazily twisted land of turreted bluff and angry purple canyon. The setting sun hung in the west, intensifying the weird colors.

His brain buzzed with a thousand questions. Who killed Harris? Why? How come the sheriff put in an appearance just when he did? Of course, the sheriff had explained that. Said Hank Fridley had found Harris' body and ridden in to report it. But never before in the three years he and Harris had lived on the spread had Fridley been at their place. And why, above all, had the sheriff been so quick to pin it on him?

Morgan shook his head. Nothing added up, nothing came up right.

A knock came at the door.

"Yes, what is it?" Morgan called.

The door, a heavy wooden affair, creaked open.

"Visitor to see you," declared Deputy Kress.

A tall man, dressed in broadcloth coat and polished boots, the dust of the trail clinging to his clothes, loomed in the doorway. It was Jay Crawford.

"Howdy," said Morgan. "This is a right nice thing for you to do."

Crawford lumbered into the room, the floor boards creaking under his heavy tread.

"Heard you was in trouble, Danny," he said, "and hurried right over. Thought maybe I could help."

"They think I killed Jack," said Morgan.

Crawford sat down heavily on the single bench in the room. "So the sheriff told me. Said you ain't got much of a case."

Morgan shrugged. "Maybe the sheriff's right. I was stuck out in the middle of nowhere with a snake-bit hoss. Can't nohow prove where I was, I guess."

Crawford wagged his head. "Sorry you got into anything like this, Danny. Been watching you and Jack. Ready to offer a helping hand if anything went wrong. But you seemed to be making out all right. Sent some of the boys over this afternoon to look after things for you."

"Much obliged," declared Morgan.

Crawford looked around furtively, then lowered his voice. "But that ain't all I came here for, Danny."

Morgan stiffened. "What else?" he snapped.

"The town's stirred up," said Crawford. "First time there's ever been a killing here. Got their bristles up, the boys have. Talking about a necktie party."

"They can't be," gasped Morgan. "Why, I'm not even charged with anything yet. There isn't any real evidence . . ."

"That don't make any difference," insisted Crawford. "Some of the hot-heads got to talking over in the Red Rooster and all of the others joined in and before you know it everybody's mad at you."

"They can't do it," insisted Morgan. "The sheriff . . ."

Crawford spat in disgust. "The sheriff's a dirty coward," he declared. "He'd high tail it out of here first sign of trouble. But I got a plan all figured out."

He pitched his voice to a husky whisper. "I'll get some of my own boys together and right after dark we'll rush the jail, like we was planning a necktie party of our own. The sheriff'll clear out and we'll bust down the door and do a lot of shooting and hollering. In the uproar you'll light a shuck. We'll say you slipped away from us."

Morgan considered. "But that would mean running away. Leaving my spread behind. Admitting I'm guilty."

"If it's money you're thinking about," said Crawford, "let me know soon as you get settled someplace and I'll pay you a reasonable price for your lay-out. Not that I need it . . ."

"Just neighborly," suggested Morgan.

"That's it," declared Crawford. "Just neighborly, that's all. Kind of got to like you. Want to help you any way I can."

"It's no go, Crawford," said Morgan.

"What's that?"

"I said it was no go. I'm sticking here, necktie party or no necktie party."

"You mean . . ."

"I mean I'm seeing this thing through. There's something haywire about this whole business. Somebody's out to get me . . . and I'm not going to be got."

"They'll string you up, sure as shooting," warned Crawford.

"I'll take my chances," Morgan declared.

The rancher rose slowly, shaking his head. "Wish you'd let me help you, Danny."

"I'm much obliged for the offer," Morgan said. "But I can't see it that way."

Listening to the retreating footsteps of Crawford and the deputy, Morgan sat down on the bench and tried to figure things out. There was something behind Crawford's offer of escape, he was sure. Maybe Crawford really did think he was guilty, really was trying to help him get away. But somehow that explanation didn't hold water. Did Crawford want his ranch? It hardly seemed likely. The rancher had thousands of acres of his own, more than he needed. Water was no consideration, for Crawford had plenty of that, too.

His thoughts led him nowhere except to suggest that, after all, he may have been foolish not to accept help. Once away, he could start over with the money from the spread. He didn't like the idea, but it was better than decorating a cottonwood.

Twilight came and slipped swiftly into darkness. Out in the badlands a panther screamed and on the prairie the coyotes set up their dismal howling. Somewhere down in the cedar brakes an owl laughed irrationally.

From the town, down near the Red Rooster saloon, came the yells of men, occasionally a six-gun shot. The boys were having them a time.

He went to the side window and stared out. The saloon and store windows lighted the street and the space in front of the two buildings was swarming with men, some of them on their horses, some jostling around on foot. Someone standing on the porch of the store was trying to make a speech, shouting to make himself heard above the angry roar that came from the crowd.

Morgan felt the short hairs stiffen along the back of his neck, felt the stir of fear crawling on his spine. There was something in the voices of those men . . . something that was not quite human.

A bull voice bellowed out, drowning out the hum. "To hell with all this jabber. Some one get a rope!"

THREE or four men started a rush for the store doorway, some of the others mounted their horses. A few of them started toward the jail, then stopped and waited.

What Crawford had said was right!

Frantically he turned from the window, started toward the door, then turned back, with a sudden realization of the hopelessness of his situation rising to choke him.

A board creaked beneath his feet and he stopped stock still, remembering how the boards had teetered under Crawford's tread.

The jail was not strongly built. It never had been meant to house anyone who really wanted to get away. Its usual tenants came on pay-day nights when over-enthusiastic drunks were bent on shooting up the town.

Morgan went to his knees, feeling the floor with his hands. His fingers slid into a crack. He tightened his grip and surged upward. The board yielded a little. He put more strength into it and it came still further. Breathlessly, he ripped at it fiercely and the board came free. He tossed it to one side, grasped another one, ripped it out, let his body down into the hole.

There wasn't much space. Just enough room for a man's body.

Bellying in the dirt, he dragged himself along between the two stringers. His head bumped and his shoulder scraped on the floor above.

Dirt clogged the way and he dug at it furiously with his hands, like a dog after a gopher. A spear of nighttime light appeared before his face. The dirt he had been digging at was last winter's banking thrown up around the jail to help keep out the cold.

Out of the night came the howl of the mob, the beat of racing hoofs, the sudden crack of six-guns. They were storming the jail!

Savagely, Morgan thrust himself forward, plowing through the remaining pile of dirt, clawing fiercely to free himself. For one sickening moment he thought he was stuck fast and then surged free.

For a moment, he crouched, gulping in great breaths of air.

The hoofs drummed closer and voices bellowed with madness. Six-guns hammered.

Straight ahead lay the badlands. Less than a hundred rods away. Once in there and they'd never find him.

Bending low he dashed for the gap, the gap the buffalo had used for uncounted ages. Hunched over, he held his breath, tightening his muscles, sucking in his stomach, expecting any moment to feel the blow of a .45 slug between his shoulder blades.

He had covered half the distance before the first startled whoop back at the jail announced he had been seen. A gun barked viciously and a bullet whined above his head. Another gun hammered and another. Morgan flung himself to one side in a mighty leap, zigzagging, running low. If he could only reach the shadow of those bushes!

Behind him red flashes stained the night. One slug ripped sod at his feet. Another passed so close it fanned his cheek. Wild whoops rang out and hoofs thundered on the prairie.

Morgan felt the ground dip beneath his feet, flung himself forward into bushes, struck the ground and rolled. Thorns ripped at his clothing, his right arm was nearly paralyzed when it struck a rock. He rocketed over a cut bank in a 20 foot drop, managed to land on his feet before he stumbled to his knees. Then he was running, twisting and leaping down the canyon, keeping in the shadows.

Fifteen minutes later, he stopped and listened. Noise still came from the canyon below the town, that of men on foot beating the bush. Soon they would give up and go back to spend the night in drinking and boasting. No one would risk a horse in such a place at night.

They might be after him as soon as it was light, although he doubted it. The hanging fever would have burned itself out by then. Anyhow, it would be a good idea to put some distance between himself and Buffalo Gap.

He angled across the side of the butte, started down into another canyon. In the darkness his foot caught in a low-creeping bush and he pitched suddenly forward. His outthrust hands were too late to save him, his head cracked against a stone. Danny Morgan lay limp.

THE smell of frying bacon filled the air. Somewhere nearby a bird was singing lustily. Someone was shuffling about.

Danny lay quiet, eyes still closed. His head ached. Slowly he opened one eye, stared up at unpeeled pole rafters thatched with yellow clay. He opened the other eye and turned his head to one side.

He was in a small cabin. The floor, he saw, was earthen. A rickety table, built of saplings and a couple of old boards, leaned crazily against the log walls. Two elk antlers hung on the wall, served as a gun rack, held an oldtime rifle. A pair of dirty trousers and a battered felt hat dangled from a peg.

A man moved into his vision, carrying a cup and plate to the table. He was old. Long gray hair curled over the shoulders of a red flannel shirt, his face was a salt and pepper mass of whiskers.

"Bill!" cried Morgan.

Badlands Bill turned around, grinned with tobacco stained teeth.

"So yuh came to life," he said.

"My head hurts like hell," said Morgan.

"It's got a lump on it size of a goose egg," declared Bill. "Wonder yuh didn't bat yore brains out."

Morgan slung his legs off the bed.

"I remember stubbing my toe and falling," he said.

"Yuh fetched yourself a crack on the noodle that laid yuh out," said Bill. "Dang near busted the rock, yuh did. I was kind of trailin' along behind yuh."

Morgan stiffened. "Trailing along behind me?"

"Shore. I was just coming up the gap into town when all hell bruk loose. I saw yuh runnin' and all them jaspers after yuh, so being a peaceable sort of cuss, I just kind of hid in some bushes and watched the goings on. I see yuh ain't got no shootin' irons and I figured maybe some of the boys might push yuh kind of hard. So I jogged along with yuh, thinkin' maybe if they did I could grab me a hand."

"Do you mean you was siding with me?"

"Bet yore britches," Bill told him. "Don't like this here idear of the whole danged town jumpin' on one guy. Besides, most of them jaspers was Diamond C men and there ain't nothin' I hate worser than the Diamond C."

"Wait a second," said Morgan, slowly. "You must be wrong on that count, Bill. Crawford himself was over and offered to help me out. Offered to fake a hanging party and let me get away. Maybe that's what he did. Even after I told him I didn't . . ."

"None of them jaspers was bent on lettin' yuh get away," Bill declared. "They was pourin' lead at yuh like water out of a bucket. And they wasn't shootin' at the sky, neither. Them guns was a-pointin' right at yore back."

"And most of them were Diamond C men?"

"Bet yore boots they was. Meanest bunch of hombres that ever cluttered up the range."

Morgan shook his head. "Can't figure it out a-tall," he said. "Crawford himself . . ."

"You come over here and squat," invited Bill. "Get some meat an coffee inside yore carcass and then yuh and me is goin' to talk."

Morgan made his way dizzily across the room, took a seat on a packing box covered with a sheep pelt. Bill poured a tin cup full of steaming coffee, forked half a grouse and strips of bacon onto a plate.

With the scent of food in his nostrils, Morgan realized that he was hungry, hadn't eaten since the noon before. Eagerly he stripped off the leg of the grouse, ate ravenously.

Finished, he pushed his plate away and looked at Bill. The old man had stoked up his stubby pipe. Glowing and sputtering under forced draft, the tobacco seemed in iminent danger of setting fire to his whiskers.

One of the old beaver trappers who had stayed on after the beaver were gone, Bill was one of Buffalo Gap's characters. Morgan had seen him many times before, had had a drink or two with him at times in the Red Rooster, understood the old man lived in a cabin tucked off somewhere in the badlands. No one seemed to know just where.

"You seem to have your back up at the Diamond C," said Morgan. "What did they ever do to you?"

"Three, four years back," said Bill, "I slow-elked one of their critters. Hard winter and no game in miles. I ain't one that starves when meat walks right up to the door, even if it does tote a brand."

"I can guess it," Morgan said. "They raised hell with you."

"They more than raised hell, mister," declared Bill, "they were plumb set on doin' me violence. Me and my gun argued them out of it."

The old man sat silently for a moment, clouds of tobacco smoke seething in his whiskers.

"I don't know what kind of trouble yuh are in," he finally said, "but it must be powerful bad. I been waitin' for it to happen, sooner or later, ever since I talked to that rock feller last summer."

"What rock fellow?"

"Feller Crawford had lookin' over his ranch. Kind of dudish feller. Wore laced boots, he did. From back east. Said he was a geolo . . . something like geography, though that ain't it."

"Geologist," suggested Morgan.

The old man slapped his knee. "By cracky, that's the word. Never could remember it. Looks at rocks, he told me, and knows what's underneath. Crawford had him out sizin' up his spread for oil."

"There isn't any oil in this country," objected Morgan.

"Feller told me there was," insisted Bill. "Me and him got drinkin' one night and he sort of likkered up. Told me lots of things he probably shouldn't of told. Said there was oil, all right, by cracky, but it wasn't on Crawford's land. Said it was in a big pool just north of Crawford's place."

"North," yelled Morgan. "Why, that's my place!"

The old man nodded. "That's what I thought, too. Sat around long time tryin' to figure out if I should tell yuh. Decided not to 'cause it wasn't none of my danged business."

Morgan rose to his feet and walked to the door, stood looking eastward to the dim purple of the escarpment. The sun was only an hour or so above the horizon. In the creek below the water babbled with a sleepy sound. A scarlet bird flashed from the top of a dead cedar, skimmed the sagebrush.

Old Bill joined him at the door.

"Goin' to be another burner," he opined, squinting at the sun.

"I got business for tonight," said Morgan, tersely.

"Thought yuh might have," said Badlands Bill.

BUFFALO GAP was quiet, quiet with the cool of night after an August day. Unlike the night before, there was no movement in the street. The windows of the Red Rooster glowed yellow, but the porch of the saloon was empty. Only one horse stood at the hitching rail.

Danny Morgan moved like a fleeting shadow from the bushes at the head of the gap, making for the jail. Stooping low and running, he reached the back of the building. Crouching there, he waited for any sound that might announce he had been seen. Putting his hand down on the ground, it came in contact with fresh, damp earth and looking down, he saw that he squatted beside the hole he had clawed open to escape the night before.

Moving cautiously, Morgan slid around the corner of the jail. There was a light in the office. Slowly he edged up to the window, looked in. Kress, the deputy, sat with his feet on the desk, his chair tilted back, hat over his face. The lamp burned low. There was no sign of the sheriff.

Swiftly, Morgan's eyes swept the wall, lighted on the double belt and pair of guns slung from a nail. He would have recognized those guns anywhere.

The door stood half open and Kress did not stir when Morgan pushed it easily. For a second, Morgan stood in the doorway, then strode forward.

The deputy jerked in surprise, half swinging his feet off the desk, but before he could utter a cry, Morgan had him by the throat, was bearing him backward to the floor. The chair went over with a clatter.

Kress fought madly, trying to cry out, but the grip on his throat squeezed his cries to tiny gurgles that bubbled faintly from his lips. He tried to reach his gun, but it had swung under his body as he fell, was pinned between him and the floor. Viciously he brought a knee up into Morgan's stomach and for a long moment the rancher felt himself tumbling giddily into a swaying pit of blackness. But he managed to keep his hands locked on Kress' throat, drove his fingers into the flesh of the man he held.

Kress tried with the knee again, but his strength was failing. His eyes widened and he gasped and sobbed for breath. With pawing hands he clawed ineffectually at the hands that throttled him. His boot heels beat a feeble tattoo on the floor.

Dropping Kress, Morgan moved quickly to the wall and jerked down the double belt and guns that hung there . . . the guns that had been taken from him. He took out each gun and spun the cylinders to be sure they were fully loaded, then put them back again.

Calmly the rancher closed the door and slid the bolt, then went back to Kress, stripped off the deputy's gun belt and flung it in a corner. With a length of rope he found in a desk drawer, he tied Kress' hands behind him. He used the man's own neckerchief to gag him. Then he hauled Kress over to the desk and propped him up.

The deputy's eyes flickered open and for a moment he stared at Morgan with a puzzled look.

Morgan grinned at him. "How do you feel, Kress?"

Kress worked his jaws, but no sound came.

"Yes, I know," said Morgan, "I'll swing for this."

Kress made gurgling sounds.

"Somebody will be around and find you soon," said Morgan. "Maybe it is a dirty trick to play on you, but no worse than you played on me. And I had to get my guns again. Can't do what I'm planning without guns."

His face sobered. "There's just one thing, Kress. You hombres heaved me in jail for a killing I didn't do and never lifted a finger to stop a necktie party that was all set to get me. I ain't forgetting that. You shoved me down the owlhoot trail and if I got to travel it, I aim to travel it plumb right. So tell the sheriff that if he comes after me he better come with guns out. That goes for you, too, or anybody else."

Deliberately, Morgan turned on his heel, unlocked the door and stepped outside. The street still was clear. The horse still stood, with drooping head, at the hitching post.

Grimly, Morgan slid a six gun from its holster and clutching it in his hand, moved boldly forward, making no effort to hide his progress. With a gun, there was no longer any need of skulking.

Reaching the horse, he untied the reins and vaulted into the saddle. At that moment the bat wings of the saloon swung open and a man stepped out. For a moment he stood stock still in astonishment, then with a wild whoop went for his guns.

Morgan yelled and raked savagely with his spurs as the horse reared and danced. Light from the window fell across the face of the man on the porch as he took a quick step forward. It was Hank Fridley, the Diamond C foreman, the man who had found Jack Harris and ridden to tell the sheriff.

Still fighting the rearing horse, Morgan snatched at his holster, ripped one of the .45s free. Fridley's hand moved. Lead droned past Morgan's ear. Then the other gun was talking and the horse bucked wildly.

Twisting in his saddle, Morgan triggered savagely, spraying the saloon front with a hail of death. Fridley dived for the safety of the street, going flat on his belly in the deep layer of yellow dust.

With a whoop of triumph, Morgan aimed his last shot at the man in the center of the street, the slug raising a geyser of dust six inches from his face.

Then the hammer clicked on an empty chamber.

The horse still was runing, stretching out and eating up the ground. Morgan let him run.

Darkness closed in behind until the lights of Buffalo Gap were twinkling fireflies far away.

Morgan rode east, toward the ranch house of the Diamond C.

THE buildings of the Diamond C were a dark huddle on the prairie.

Standing beside the horse, Morgan waited in a tiny draw that ran between two swales, ears strained for the rolling drum of hoof beats that would announce Fridley's arrival. That Fridley would head straight for the ranch as soon as he could get another horse, Morgan had no doubt.

He did not have long to wait. Within five minutes the racing horse and rider topped a ridge less than a quarter mile away, swept down toward the ranch.

He heard Fridley's yell as the foreman pulled up in front of the ranch house, saw a light come on through one of the windows. Another light blinked out of a bunk house window. The bunk house door spouted men. Some of them ran toward the house, others headed for the corral.

"They'll figure I'll head out for my own spread," Morgan told himself. "Maybe to cover up some evidence or get something I don't want to leave behind. Some of them will ride out there and the others will try to cut off my escape back into the badlands."

The riders gathered in a knot around the front door of the ranch house. Someone that looked like Crawford was standing in the door, his form outlined by the lamplight.

With a smile of amusement, Morgan watched them go, waited another quarter hour, then mounted the horse and rode slowly to the ranch house.

No one challenged him as he dismounted and strode up the porch. Without pausing, he flung open the door and walked in.

"That you, Mike?" came Crawford's voice.

Morgan did not answer. The voice had come from the office, just off the living room.

Without hurrying, without a change of stride, he covered the space to the office door.

Crawford, sitting behind the desk, glanced up and a look of amazement, slowly replaced by anger, spread across his face. Then he moved swiftly, standing, kicking back his chair, all in one effortless bit of action.

But at the first hint of a move, Morgan's hands dropped to his gun butts and the two sixes came out, steadied waist high. Crawford's hands stopped, just short of his guns.

"You got something I want, Crawford," Morgan told him, tersely.

"All I've got for you is a rope," snarled Crawford.

"Any more talk like that," Morgan told him, smoothly, "and I'll let daylight through you. I haven't got a thing to lose. You already got me pegged as a killer and hanging for a real killing ain't no worse than hanging for one I've never done."

Crawford stared at him, flinched a little at what he saw in Morgan's eyes.

Morgan holstered one of his guns, reached behind him and closed the door, slid along so he had his back against the wall.

"H'ist out those guns," he ordered. "Easy like. Just the butts between your thumb and fingers. Heave them on the floor. In front of the desk."

Crawford hesitated. Morgan's voice was deadly. "Get them out."

Never shifting his gaze from Morgan, Crawford complied. The two guns hit the floor in front of the desk.

"Now," said Morgan, "I want to know where that geological report is."

"Geological report?" asked Crawford.

"Don't play dumb," snapped Morgan. "You know what I mean. The report the geologist made for you. The one that showed there was oil on my place."

Crawford didn't budge, didn't speak.

Morgan moved forward, threateningly.

"Do I have to knock your teeth in?" he asked.

"It's not here," said Crawford.

"That's just too damn bad for you," snapped Morgan.

His gun moved slightly downward and his eyes narrowed. His finger tensed on the trigger.

"Right in the belly," he said. "You'll suffer like hell, Crawford."

Crawford wilted. "No, Danny, don't do that! It's here. Right in my desk!"

He moved toward the desk, but Morgan stopped him.

"Stay where you are," he ordered. "Tell me which drawer."

"The upper left hand," said Crawford, breathlessly.

Keeping his eyes on the rancher, Morgan moved behind the desk, pulled open the drawer and flung a sheaf of papers on the desk.

"Pick it out," he snapped.

Crawford moved forward slowly, then dropped out of sight behind the desk. With one motion, Morgan scooped the papers from the desk top, gave the heavy piece of furniture a shove.

A gun roared from the floor and fire burned its way along Morgan's left arm. Crawford screamed as the desk toppled over on him and in that moment Morgan spun about, lowered his head and leaped straight for the window.

Glass exploded in a shattering spray and he was through, stumbling along the ground, trying to keep his feet. Stuffing the papers into his pocket, he raced toward the front of the house, leaped for the saddle.

The horse wheeled on a dime and streaked off. From the house behind him a gun coughed hoarsely.

Faint yells came from the ranch house.

Morgan, riding westward into the night, felt gingerly of his left arm. The bullet had barely creased the flesh. The arm, he knew, would be stiff tomorrow, but otherwise was unharmed.

"One thing," he told himself and the night wind, "I sure am going to make Crawford know he's been in a fight."

BADLANDS BILL had been correct. There was oil on his spread, which explained a lot of things. Explained why he had been framed for the Harris killing, why Crawford had been so anxious to help him out the night he was in jail.

Crawford knew and the sheriff knew they didn't have a case they could make stick, knew that if he ever was brought to trial the charge would be thrown out for lack of evidence.

Sitting there, beside the coals of his campfire, Morgan felt a surge of anger sweep over him. Crawford had never intended to let him escape when his men had stormed the jail. The rancher, Morgan was sure now, had set out to kill him as deliberately as he had killed Jack Harris, or hired him to be killed. Perhaps, after all, it hadn't been Crawford who had squatted among the rocks, smoking cigarettes, waiting until there was no chance of missing.

He reached up and took the survey report from his pocket. It was lucky, he told himself, that the report actually had been among the papers he had taken from the drawer. Crawford might have tried to fool him, told him the wrong drawer. That he had indicated the right drawer meant only one thing. The rancher had acted on impulse when he had dropped on the floor and gone after the guns that lay there.

Morgan smoothed the paper out across his knee and read it slowly again, squinting his eyes against the glare of sun.

Something jerked viciously at the paper in Morgan's hand, jerked and tore it from his grip and even as it jerked the silence was cracked wide open by the sharp, wicked chortle of a high calibre rifle.

Morgan hurled himself behind the nearest boulder. And as he landed, crouching, both six guns were in his fists.

Slowly, alert for any movement, any hint of the man who had fired the rifle, Morgan examined each coulee mouth, each perching boulder, each thicket wilting in the sun.

Slow minutes ticked away and the land drowsed on into a sleepy afternoon.

Then something moved, just a flicker of movement, in a thicket below the pink and yellow butte. Eyes glued to the spot, Morgan held his crouch and waited. The movement came again, as if a man were shifting his position, tired from being too long in one pose.

There was something there that looked like a grey sombrero, something white below it that might have been the smudge of the gunman's face.

Carefully, Morgan brought up one of his guns, steadying it against the boulder. The sights lined on what might have been a hat and his finger started to squeeze the trigger.

Something struck the boulder just above his head and howled off into space, a ricochetting bullet tumbling end over end, drowning out the ugly cough of the hidden rifle. Tiny splinters of rock showered on Morgan's hat and instinctively he ducked. Another bullet slammed into the rock, six inches below where the first had hit and went screaming off with an angry hum.

Swiftly, Morgan scrambled around the rock, breath rasping in his throat. The thing that had moved in the thicket hadn't been the rifleman at all. Probably a rabbit or maybe a bear. Or . . . and his heart stood chilled for an instant as he thought of it . . . there might be two gun slingers on his trail. Maybe more.

Faint traces of smoke floated from a rocky point cropping out of a hog back just across the creek.

Morgan nodded in grim satisfaction. At least, he had spotted the position.

He crouched and waited, guns ready.

The sun glinted on a metallic object and Morgan saw a rifle barrel slowly sliding forward around a rock. Hunched, with the feel of death cold between his shoulder blades, Morgan did not stir. Every instinct in him screamed for him to leap out of danger's way, to throw himself behind the rock, to put something between himself and that rifle barrel. But he stuck it out.

A brown splotch appeared beside the boulder on the slope above. A splotch that grew larger and larger. Morgan gulped and held his breath. That splotch was someone's elbow, the bent elbow of the man who held the gun. The rifle still had to move a ways yet to be trained correctly, and Morgan waited . . . waited for a bigger target.

Then suddenly he went into action. His right hand snapped up and for an instant the six gun froze rigid in his fist before it blazed and blazed again.

A shrill scream knifed the air and the rifle plunged forward to land on the slope below, sliding slowly, plowing a furrow with its muzzle through the powdery talus.

Morgan charged from behind his boulder clawing his way up the treacherous incline.

From the valley below a rifle spanged and dirt spurted at his feet. The rifle roared again and a bullet hit the rocks ahead and plunged off into space with a doleful screech.

Spinning on his heel, Morgan saw the second man standing upright in a patch of bushes, rifle at his shoulder, and snapped a shot at him. The man flung himself to one side as both of Morgan's guns talked, heaving a hail of lead.

Then, guns still smoking, Morgan hurled himself at the boulders above him, circling around their upper end.

A six gun roared and the bullet thudded into the slope. Springing toward the sound of the shot, Morgan saw a man crouched with his back against the rocks, left arm smashed and bleeding, but with a six gun in his other fist and a snarl of hatred on his face.

The man was Fridley, Crawford's foreman.

Fridley's gun swung upward, but even as it did, Morgan's hogleg hammered and the foreman howled with pain. Slowly the gun in his hand tilted its muzzle toward the ground, then dropped from a hand smashed by a bullet.

Slowly Morgan walked forward, until he stood six feet from the wounded man. A smile twitched his lip as he looked at Fridley.

"Hank, you sure are stoved up," he said.

The foreman snarled at him, waving a bloody hand. "They'll get you yet," he screamed. "You'll swing. Sure as hell, you'll swing."

"Not unless they send better men than you after me," said Morgan.

A still smoking cigarette butt lay at Fridley's feet. Morgan glanced around. Another butt lay a short distance away. And on the ground something else, a tobacco sack.

Slowly Morgan stooped and picked it up. The sack was turned inside out!

Staring at it, his eyes narrowed.

"You do a lot of smoking on your killing jobs," he told Fridley, quietly.

Fridley said nothing, glaring at him.

Morgan tossed the sack up and down in his palm.

"Found one of these things, just like this, turned inside out, where you waited to kill Harris."

"What are you trying to do?" yelled Fridley. "Pin the blame on someone else?"

Morgan's face turned grim. "I don't have to pin it on anyone," he said. "I know who killed Harris. It was you."

He hoisted a gun slowly.

"You fixed it up so it looked like I was the one that did it," Morgan said. "You made an outlaw out of me. Guess nobody would believe me now, even if I had proof I didn't do it."

Fridley's eyes gleamed with fear. "What you getting at, Morgan?"

"Guess I'll just naturally have to gun you, Hank. Ain't got a thing to lose. Besides, I'd get a heap of satisfaction out of doing it."

"Look, Danny," pleaded Fridley, "you can't do that. Not in cold blood."

"Don't see why not," declared Morgan, almost cheerfully. "You ain't in no shape to stop me."

From the valley below came the swift clatter of hoofs.

"See," said Morgan, "your friend's riding out on you. Probably figures you're a goner already. He'll be back after a while with help to round me up. In a minute or two I'll fix you for planting, then move on."

"I'll clear you," yelled Fridley, almost slobbering in terror. "I'll tell them I killed Harris. I'll . . ."

He stopped and stared at Morgan. "Go on," Morgan ordered.

"Crawford made me do it. Said he'd turn me in for something down in Texas if I didn't. He knows there's oil on your spread and when he couldn't buy it . . ."

Morgan nodded. "So he figured if he killed Harris and got me hung for the killing, he could get the ranch. But he was afraid I couldn't be convicted, so he fixed up that necktie party."

Fridley licked dry lips.

"That's about right," he said.

Morgan stood up. "We got riding to do," he said. "Can you walk down to your hoss or do I have to carry you?"

"I can walk," said Fridley.

GUN-BUZZARD

By FRED HUNT

What old Dad Hardesty lacked in speed, he made up in courage and wits.

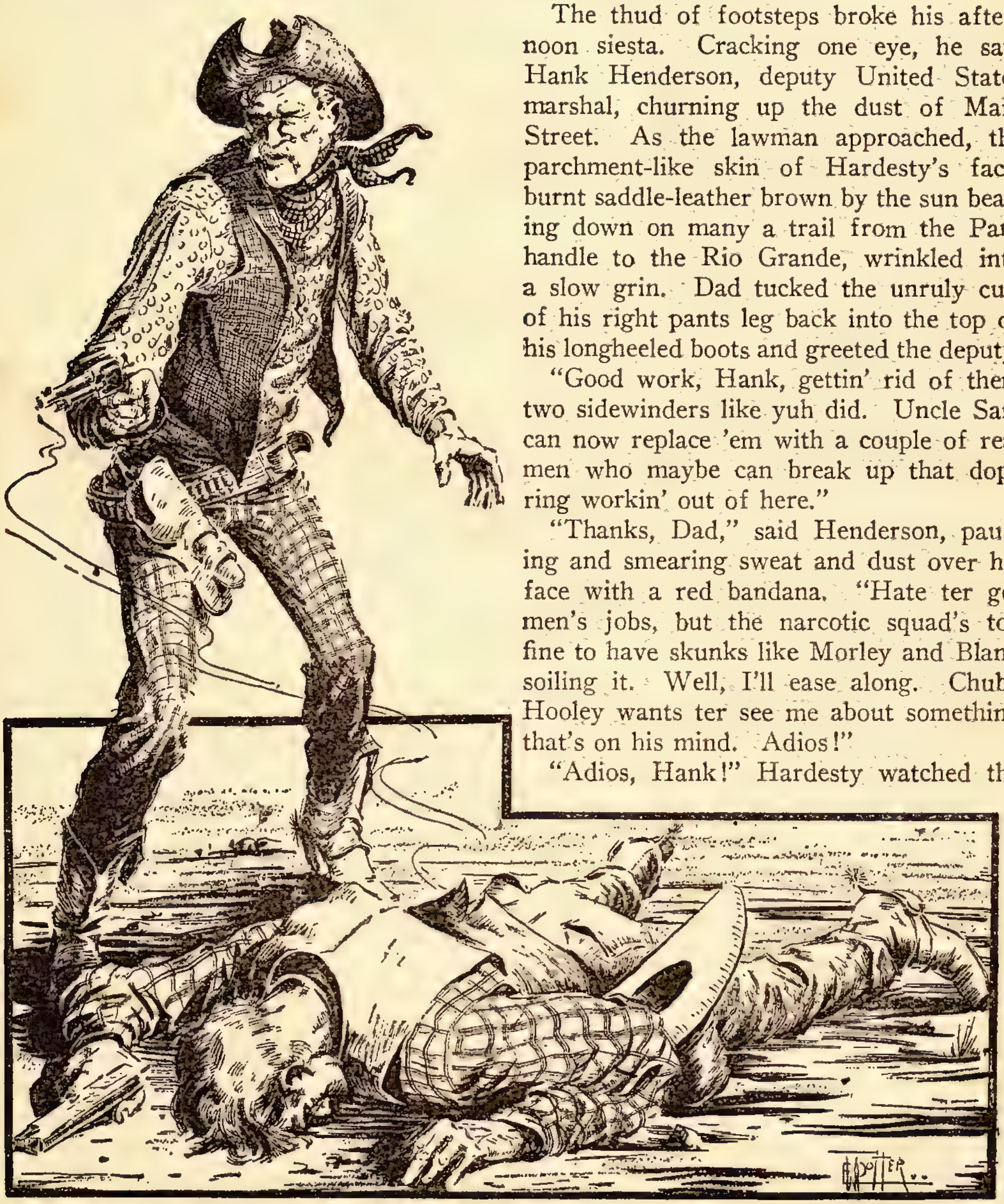
WHILE Coltville drowsed peacefully under the broiling Texas sun, Dad Hardesty, retired Ranger, dozed in his favorite chair tilted back on the shaded veranda of the Lone Star House, one long gangling leg crossed over the other. Six-feet-three in his fancy-tooled boots, still straight as an oak sapling, the old peace officer was so thin that no one had ever been able to hit him in a gunfight—and some of the best shots in the Southwest had tried it.

The thud of footsteps broke his afternoon siesta. Cracking one eye, he saw Hank Henderson, deputy United States marshal, churning up the dust of Main Street. As the lawman approached, the parchment-like skin of Hardesty's face, burnt saddle-leather brown by the sun beating down on many a trail from the Panhandle to the Rio Grande, wrinkled into a slow grin. Dad tucked the unruly cuff of his right pants leg back into the top of his longheeled boots and greeted the deputy.

"Good work, Hank, gettin' rid of them two sidewinders like yuh did. Uncle Sam can now replace 'em with a couple of real men who maybe can break up that dope ring workin' out of here."

"Thanks, Dad," said Henderson, pausing and smearing sweat and dust over his face with a red bandana. "Hate ter get men's jobs, but the narcotic squad's too fine to have skunks like Morley and Bland soiling it. Well, I'll ease along. Chubb Hooley wants ter see me about something that's on his mind. Adios!"

"Adios, Hank!" Hardesty watched the



Like a whirling dervish, Dad Hardesty spun a quarter turn to the right, forty-five roaring as it cleared leather.

lawman trudging off in a cloud of dust. Hank was like that—thought Dad, closing his eyes—doing whatever job Uncle Sam gave him, no matter how disagreeable or how dangerous.

Blam!

Dad Hardesty and Coltville were wakened simultaneously by the dull roar of a forty-five. Cursing, jostling, men poured excitedly out of the Lone Star House, spewed forth from the batwing doors of the Broadway Oasis across the street. Dad's eyes snapped open.

Fifty feet down the street hell was popping. Hank Henderson, smoke curling from the muzzle of his drawn six-shooter, was facing Bland who, empty-handed, clutched his left arm with his right hand. Henderson whirled toward the man behind him, Morley, who had an automatic out.

Crack-crack-crack-crack-crack!

Before Henderson could get his own gun to bear, Morley poured a stream of lead into his side. The marshal crumpled to the street.

Unfolding his long frame like opening a jack-knife, Hardesty rose from his chair and trotted down the road toward the gunfight. Younger men scurried past him. Colt in hand, gold star glinting in the sunlight, Sheriff Bob Peasely lumbered by, muttering curses and panting. Among the tail-enders, Hardesty pushed his way through the jabbering ring of cow punchers, bartenders, gamblers and merchants.

Henderson, stretched out on his stomach, one cheek in the dust, Stetson off, six-gun a few inches from his out-flung hand, blood foaming through his gray corduroy shirt, was already dead—Dad saw at a glance. Bland, pot-bellied, pudgy and bleary-eyed, was clawing, white-faced, at a small red stain of his left arm.

Morley, tall, stooped of shoulder, beady-eyed with the whites flecked with yellow spots, was handing his automatic, butt-first, to Sheriff Peasely.

"Self defense . . ." Morley mouthed, his eyes shifting uneasily around the row of angry faces that hemmed him in. He flicked a thumb toward the silent figure of Henderson. "That cur, there . . . shot an unarmed man . . . Bland ain't heeled . . . then tried to plug me . . . I beat him to the draw . . ."

"Mebbe so, mebbe so," drawled the sheriff, taking him by the arm and pocketing the gun, "But I'll jes' take yuh down ter the lock-up until the coroner acts. Come along . . . someone get the coroner . . . and take Bland ter the sawbones . . ."

Watching the sheriff leading the prisoner away, Hardesty gnawed at the drooping ends of his mustache and digested the slayer's words. "Self defense . . . shot an unarmed man . . ."

Dad bit his lips under his walrus-like mustache. He hated to admit it, but Morley's alibi tallied with what he had seen with his own eyes.

"Nigger in the woodpile som'ers," the old peace officer grumbled as he trudged back toward the hotel.

That night at the inquest held in Sheriff Peasely's dingy little lamp-lit office, Dad Hardesty testified as honestly as he could just what he had seen—but it was like pulling teeth for him to get the words out of his mouth. As he heard Nate Brown, the coroner, summarize his own testimony, Hardesty felt as if he had betrayed a friend—but he knew he had told the truth.

"Hardesty seems to be the only eyewitness," went on Nate, shaking his head gravely and squinting through his thick-lensed spectacles at the sketchy notes he had jotted down. "And I'm afraid I'll have to be guided mostly by his testimony. Dad says that when he first opened his eyes, Henderson's gun was out and smokin', and of course he shot Bland. And, Dad says, Morley was jes' drawin' his gun. And then Dad saw Henderson swing around, but before he could bring his gun into action, Morley dropped him. Now, gentlemen," Nate peered over the tops of his glasses. "There don't seem to be no evidence to dispute Dad's testimony—it agrees with what Bland and Morley have said.

"Dad's testimony indicates that Henderson drew first, and that he shot Bland, who was unarmed, and that Morley didn't fire until Henderson was turnin' on him. Of course, the law gives Morley the right to presume that Henderson was tryin' to kill him, and also the right to protect himself. Any of you gentlemen got anything to say?

"Well," protested Cy Haskins, shifting his feet. "I rode herd with Hank years ago and I know he wouldn't have drawn unless he was drawn on."

"Did you see the shootin'?" asked the coroner.

"No," admitted Haskins, "I was bellyin' up ter the bar in the Last Chance about that time."

"In that case I'll have to strike out yore testimony. The law don't want to hear private opinions."

There were a few second of strained silence, broken by someone grumbling, "Tain't like Hank . . ."

"Well, gentlemen," Nate raised his voice pompously, "I officially find that the deceased shot Bland, an unarmed man, without proper provocation, and that the deceased was shot and killed by Morley who acted in legal self-defense."

A muffled murmur of angry protest surged around the crowded office, then subsided. Nate turned his eyes on Sheriff Peasely.

"There ain't no charge against the prisoner Morley. You may release him, Sheriff."

Peasely hesitated, then swallowed hard.

"Okay, Nate . . . if that's yore verdict." The sheriff's eyes hardened as he looked at Morley.

"Yo're free ter high-ball it . . . that is, in so fur as the law's concerned."

Dark, ominous glances followed Morley as he swaggered out the door, his loose, tobacco-stained lips curving downward in an insolent smile. The little group of men broke up and filed silently out of the office. Last to leave, Dad Hardesty almost bumped into Morley as he stepped outside. Morley stuck out his hand and grinned.

"Thanks, Hardesty, fer givin' me a break," he whispered.

Dad rammed both hands into his pockets as if here afraid tht they might become contaminated; his eyes bored through the darkness into Morley's rat-like face.

"I call 'em as I see 'em, Morley, even if it does give a skunk a break," he snapped, turning his back and stalking away. Morley shrugged his narrow shoulders and shuffled off into the night.

RETURNING to his little baching shack on the outskirts of town, Hardesty lighted his smoky kerosene lamp, draped his gunbelt over the prongs of a buck's head on the wall, reared back in his creaking chair, gingerly hoisted his ornamented boots to a small cleared space among the dirty dishes on the kitchen table, and got out the makings. Lighting one quirly on the end of another, his leather-brown face etched in lines of deep thought, his flowing white hair falling down over his bushy eyebrows, he reviewed the shooting.

He couldn't doubt his own eyes: he had seen Hank Henderson—as fair and square a peace officer as ever buckled on a Colt—shoot an unarmed man. And yet he knew deep down in his heart that Hank couldn't do a thing like that.

"Self defense my gizzard!" He spat disgustedly into the sand box. "Murder I calls it, and murder I'll prove it, by Judas!"

He dragged deeply on the quirly and again went over the shooting, searching vainly for a clue that might give him a lead. If poor Old Hank could have testified—but his lips were sealed by lead. Morley and Bland had told air-tight stories. But surely there must be some clue . . . Chub Hooley!

The old peace officer stiffened at the name. Chub, bartender at the Last Chance—sort of a wishy-washy hombre, not too bad.

Hardesty flipped the butt into the sand box, rammed both pants legs back into the boot-tops from whence they had escaped, and reached for his gun-belt and sombrero.

Surprise worked itself on the puffy, sweating face of Chub Hooley, a flabby mountain of a man, as Hardesty pushed through the swinging doors and sauntered up to the bar.

"What'll it be, Dad?" he asked, grinning a bit uncertainly.

"Nuthin', Chub. I jes' wanted ter see yuh," Hardesty glanced pointedly at two punchers fondling their glasses close by, and then looked meaningly at Chub, "Private, I mean."

Chub frowned, then forced a quick smile.

"Okay, Dad," he said, edging toward the rear of the room.

"Listen, Chub," Hardesty leaned across the mahogany and lowered his voice. "Why did yuh want ter see Hank Henderson yesterday?"

Hooley nervously twisted a damp towel in his big red hands.

"Why . . . er . . . I didn't want ter see him . . . fer nuthin."

Narrowing, the old ranger's eyes bored into the sweating face of the fat bartender.

"Yo're a liar, Hooley!"

Chub laughed off the fighting word.

"I didn't come here to argue, Hooley," Hardesty's voice dropped to an ominously low pitch. "Henderson was on his way ter see yuh when he was shot. Yuh tell me what yuh wanted with him, or I might lose my patience!"

Hooley twisted the towel into a hard knot. His little pig-like eyes rested on Hardesty's face for a fraction of a second, roamed about the room, shot a furtive glance toward the two maudlin waddies.

"I . . . er . . . wanted . . . er . . . well," Hooley's words jerked out in a hoarse, flat whisper, "Well . . . . Bland and Morley wuz drinkin' in a booth here last night, an' I overhears them plannin' ter . . ."

"Go on!" Hardesty snapped as Chub hesitated, color draining from his flushed face.

"Well . . . I wanted ter tip him off that they were goin' ter frame him . . . but they cold-decked him before I got a chanst . . ."

"It was murder, then?" Hardesty shot the question with a hissing intake of breath.

"Yes, cold-blooded. I heard 'em tell jes' how they were goin' ter do it . . . and they done it jes' like they said they would."

"Why didn't yuh volunteer ter testify at the inquest?"

Hooley squirmed under the piercing eyes of the old peace officer.

"Why . . . er . . . it'd been my word against their'n. And if they had come clear . . . well, they're tought hombres. As a matter of fact, they knowed, after they'd sobered up a bit, that I had overheard them, and they tells me they'd ventilate my guts with lead if I yips. Anyway," his voice was tinged with injured pride, "I think I done enough when I risked my hide ter send word to Hank I wanted ter see him."

Hardesty's old eyes flashed him a glance of withering contempt.

"Yes, I calculate that's about yore idear of havin' guts!"

"Well," whined Hooley defensively, "Ain't I tellin' yuh all I know? I'll tell yuh jes' how they done it. They planned ter get Henderson where witnesses could see it and then . . ."

"Don't waste time tellin' me," Hardesty cut him short. "Get yore hat and come with me. Yo're goin' ter tell it to the district attorney."

"No, no," protested Hooley through chattering teeth, "I'm afraid ter be seen . . . I don't want ter get mixed up in it. I don't . . ."

"Get yore hat!" snapped Hardesty.

Moving like a man in a trance, Chub got his hat, passed word that he'd be back shortly, and waddled out the door with Hardesty.

Two blocks down the street they turned sharply and began treading a cow path that wandered over a slope toward a cluster of houses. After a bit Hardesty's curiosity got the better of him.

"How'd they cold-deck him?" he asked, a bit sheepishly.

"H . . . e . . . ll's B . . . e . . . lls . . ." panted Chub, puffing and blowing behind him. "Wait til I get ter the top of the hill and . . . and catch my . . . breath."

THEY had gone but a few steps further when the faint clatter of hoofbeats reached their ears. It grew louder, nearer. Hardesty glanced over his shoulder back down the winding path.

"Comin' this way," he drawled. "Some drunken waddy high-tailin' it back ter his spread, I reckon. Better give him elbow room, or he'll run us down."

The two men edged off to one side of the path and waited. Straining their eyes down the hill, they made out a dark blur, indistinct at first, then gradually assuming the outlines of a horse and rider.

"He ort ter be cow-hided fur gallopin' a bronc up a hill like that," growled the old ranger.

The outlines of the horse and man grew still more distinct, larger, nearer. Then, just as the bronc shot past with the tattoo of steel-shod feet on gravel, three quick shots cracked out and three jets of flame stabbed the night.

Hardesty's six-gun leaped from leather . . . roared once.

"Missed!" grumbled the old borderman, glaring reproachfully at his heavy Colt, still hip-high. He threw a baleful glance at the horse and rider, now melting into darkness. "Oh, well, Chub," went on the old ranger, holstering his gun, "Maybe I was too hasty anyway. Maybe he was jes' orey-eyed and thought he'd have a leetle sport makin' us dance. But, judgin' from the slant of those spits o' flame, it kind'a looked like he was aimin' purtty near me and yuh, don't yuh think so . . . Chub! Chub? Art yuh hit?"

Hardesty bent over the fallen man, lying on his back beside the path, hat toppled against a mesquite bush. A dark stain was spreading over the white shirt stretched across the billowy chest. A gurgling sound escaped the bartender's lips. He sighed deeply, and then there was silence. Hardesty reached down and felt the pulse for a few seconds, then dropped the flabby wrist.

"Dead as a door nail!" he grunted, straightening up and glaring up the path into the darkness from whence came the faint, dying clackety-clack of horsebeats.

Hardesty fashioned and lighted a quirly, took a few deep drags, tossed the butt into the mesquite, spread his silk bandana gently over the dead bartender's face, now chalk white, and started on up the hill. Realizing, as he continued on toward the district attorney's home, that the death of Hooley removed a vital witness, Hardesty reproached himself for not listening to Chub's story when the bartender first started to tell him just what plans Morley and Bland had made, and just how they had carried them out.

After sending men for Hooley's body, District Attorney Ed Sandberg, a well-fed little man, whose office-pale face and pink bald head provided a ludicrous two-tone color scheme, listened with interest to Hardesty's story. But his plump, hairless face clouded as Dad finished, and he shook his head slowly.

"Sorry, Dad, but the law's hands are tied."

"But I could testify," urged Hardesty, jamming his right pants leg back into the boot-top, "that Chub told me what he overheard them diamond-backs plannin' ter do and . . ."

"Sorry, Dad," went on Sandberg, still shaking his head, and an amused smile spreading over his smooth-shaven face. "You haven't forgotten the rules of evidence, have you?"

"My God!" Hardesty ejaculated, slumping back in his chair, "I had forgot—conversation not in the presence of the defendant is excluded."

"See, Dad?" Sandberg continued, "No use bringing them to trial—we could never get that evidence before a jury."

Face clouded, eyes staring vacantly at the flowered design in the carpet, Hardesty sat in glum silence. Sandberg cleared his throat.

"I feel worse about it than you, Dad. Aside from this shooting, there's another little mystery I'd like to clear up."

Looking up through his bushy eyebrows, Hardesty studied the district attorney's white, chubby face for a minute.

"Couldn't be them recent cattle rustlin' jobs, could it, Ed?"

The little man merely smiled blandly. Hardesty went on.

"Don't suppose it ever struck yore mind, Ed, that there hadn't been any rustlin' around here for years until Morley and Bland lost their jobs and got hard up fer money, did it?"

"Why, Dad, I never thought of such a thing," rejoined Sandberg, a twinkle in his baby blue eyes. "And of course I never thought of connecting the fact that those two were spreading dinero high, wide and handsome around the barrooms a few days after forty head of yearlings had disappeared from the little spread Ike Greene's widow is trying to keep going, either."

"Owlhooters low enough to raid a widder's spread should be spread-eagled on an ant-bed," growled Hardesty, rising to his feet and jamming on his old sombrero.

One pants-leg fluttering untidily out of its boot-top, the old borderman stalked out into the night, heart-heavy with the bitter knowledge that the only witness who could place a rope around the necks of Morley and Bland was now stiffening in rigor mortis. Dejection, hopelessness, weighted his footsteps as he slogged home.

The battered clock on the wall had tinkled three times before Hardesty finally flipped the last butt into the sand box, dragged his feet off the kitchen table, glared defiantly at the growing stack of dirty dishes, rose and yawned. Kicking off his high-heeled boots and shucking off his gray flannel shirt and pants, he blew out the lamp and turned in. He had been lying there, eyes closed but keen old brain on the gallop, for some minutes when he suddenly sat up straight in the darkness and grinned from ear to ear.

"By Judas! Why didn't I think of that before?"

He lay back on the horse blanket, closed his eyes, and a few minutes later his snores were rattling the rafters.

THE district attorney had just finished breakfast the next morning when Hardesty barged into his home again. Again Sandberg listened with patience, but with little enthusiasm.

"Yes," he agreed when the old ranger had finished explaining his theory of the killing. "It does tally with the known facts; but, after all, it's only a theory, and theories don't go in court. The law's hands are still tied, and it'd only be a waste of county money to bring them into court."

"Court?" barked the old ranger testily. "Who said court? Maybe the hands o' the law is tied, but by Judas the hands o' Old Dad Hardesty ain't tied!"

Sandberg gazed speculatively into the bristling old face.

"Just what can you do about it, Dad?"

The old ranger drew the wispy end of his drooping mustache into his mouth, spat it out, smiled enigmatically.

"Wul, now, I might start out by oilin' my six-gun."

Sandberg waggled a fat, admonitory finger into Hardesty's face.

"Remember, Dad. You can't go around shooting men on suspicion."

"Listen, Ed. I respect the law much as any man: I spent forty years enforcin' it. But sometimes the law gets so snarled up in its own rules—well, when I was ridin' herd on outlaws I l'arned that now and then yuh jes' nacherally got ter write a new statute to unsnarl it . . . and yer do yore writin' with a six-gun."

"Now, Dad, I can't sanction anything outside the law . . ."

"I ain't askin' yuh ter," growled Hardesty. "Yuh know the old sayin', 'Give a maverick enough rope and it'll hang itself'?"

"Meaning what, in this case?"

"Meanin' that I know them sidewinders framed and murdered Hank, and that I'm goin' ter give them the same chanst ter frame me!"

Sandberg listened attentively to the old man's plan of action.

"And," Hardesty concluded, "If it works out, Hank would be avenged legal-like, wouldn't he?"

"That's so," Sandberg admitted judiciously.

"And it'd be proof they framed him, wouldn't it?" Dad pressed.

"Yes," the little man conceded, staring vacantly through a window at a herd of long-horns meandering along the mesquite-fringed rim of a distant hill, "But there's one reason why it's likely to fail."

"What?" the old lawman demanded.

"You'll probably get yourself killed, that's what. Don't you see the cards'd be stacked against you? You'd have to let one of those babies draw before you went for your gun, see?"

A slow smile spread over the rugged, brown features of the ranger.

"I've lived more'n my four-score-and-ten and I don't know any better way of goin' than goin' trying to right a wrong to a friend."

Before departing, Hardesty forced Sandberg to promise that he would accidentally be hanging around the front of the Last Chance shortly before ten the next morning.

"Well, if you're bound to go through with it, here's luck," said Sandberg, squeezing the old man's long, sinewy fingers in his own little white, soft-palmed hand as the old borderman left.

"Luck usually pals up with Right," Hardesty called back over his shoulder as he trudged down the path, ends of his pants-legs fluttering in the morning breeze.

On reaching home he scrawled a message and sent it off to Morley by a bright Mexican boy who was carefully instructed not to reveal the identity of the sender. The message read:

> "Before he died Hooley spilled his guts to Hardesty. Hardesty has a date to see Sandberg in his office at ten tomorrow and tell him about it. You will see him passing the Last Chance just before ten. Be careful, for he is fast as lightning on the draw. A Friend."

Hardesty spent the rest of the morning cleaning and oiling his six-gun, a solemn ritual that often in the past had preceded a brief ceremony at some grave-side on

Boot Hill. He squinted his eyes and tried to make out the inscription engraved on the silver-mounted barrel of the old ivory-handled Colt. "To Henry Hardesty, Captain, Texas Rangers, 18 . . ."

"Dog gone, can't make out the date no more. Reckon I jes' rubbed them figgers out polishin' it. Le's see, now, jes' when was it they promoted me from sergeant to captain . . ." his eyes roamed through an open window to the blue Panhandle sky . . . He sat up with a jerk and shook his head as if he was trying to shake off old reveries. He grinned to himself and patted the white handle of the old forty-five.

"Look here, ol' pardner, there's still work fer me and yuh ter do," he whispered, placing five fresh shells in the cylinder—like all Rangers he always carried the hammer resting on an empty chamber.

Rising, he belted the gun, thonged it low on his right leg, pushed the holster a fraction of an inch forward until it exactly suited him; and then tried a number of practice draws. With each draw he would make a quarter turn to the right, bringing the gun up at hip-level so that it pointed in the opposite direction from which he had been facing. On completion of the turn and draw, only his right side—a target not more than eight inches wide at its widest point—presented itself to the make-believe adversary.

"Lost some of my speed, mebbe," he admitted, "But I'll match what's left of it with them two sidewinders."

He unbuckled the gun-belt and draped it over the buck's horns. His eyes fell on the stack of dirty dishes heaped high on the kitchen table; and he frowned, then turned his back disdainfully.

"Aw shucks, I still got enough left fer three more meals and . . . well, there's jes' a hair of a chanst I won't be eatin' any more meals after them three . . ."

He wiped his reading glasses, perched them astride the ridge of his nose which had the bold curve of an eagle's beak, got a book and tilted back in his rickety old chair, clearing an open space among the dirty dishes for his heels.

After breakfast the next morning he buckled on his gun-belt, carefully thonged the holster and headed for town. It was just five to ten, he noted by the clock in Feeney's Funeral home, as he turned onto the Main Drag. In ten more minutes, he calculated, his old carcass would be cooling on a slab behind that shuttered window—if he was just a trifle slower on the draw than he thought he was, or if he had guessed wrong. Far overhead a great black buzzard wheeled lazily among the fleecy clouds drifting across the blue Panhandle sky.

Through the haze of the dust he kicked up he saw two figures, Bland and Morley, lounging out in front of the Last Chance, a group of idlers killing time across the street. He grinned.

UNDER the flapping brim of his Stetson, he observed Morley saunter off a bit and halt about six paces from his companion. Keeping his eyes lowered, Hardesty edged over to the left until he reached the dusty footpath bordering the row of false-fronted stores, then headed directly toward the two sidewinders. Eyes still bent on the ground just ahead of his dust-caked boots, he tramped through the long shadow cast by the tall, slouching figure of Morley. A fraction of a second later he was jerked to a stop by a low, hate-heavy voice—Bland's.

"Well, Hardesty . . . understand yuh've got somethin' on yer mind!"

The old ranger slowly raised his head until his eyes, peeping from under the brim of his sombrero, rested on Bland's bloated, evil face. Coolly, insolently, Hardesty peered past the bleary red-rimmed eyes and took the measure of the warped soul behind them. The morgue-like silence was broken by the old gun-fighter's languid drawl . . . low, soft, but deadly as the warning of a rattlesnake just before it strikes.

"I don't like the tone of yore voice, Bland."

Hardesty felt the fetid breath of the other man hot in his face . . . observed Bland's right hand edge a half inch toward his right hip . . . saw the tobacco-drooling lips curve into a snarl . . . watched the yellow-coated tongue fashion fighting talk behind the brown snags . . . Dad never moved a muscle, flicked an eyelid.

"Go fer yer gun, ye dirty coward! snapped Bland, his quivering right hand blurring hipward.

Like a whirling dervish, Dad Hardesty spun a quarter turn to the right, forty-five roaring as it cleared leather.

Jack Morley, already drawing a bead on the old ranger's back, rocked unsteadily on his feet for half a second, a medley of hurt surprise and ghastly fear writhing on his sharp, rat-like features and a forty-five though his heart . . . then crumpled slowly to the ground.

Scarcely checking his spin as his Colt vomited leaden death, the old peace officer jerked to a stop after completing three-quarters of a full turn, six-gun hip-high and cocked.

"Don't shoot! Fer God sakes, don't kill me . . ." whined Bland, empty hands clawing toward the sky. "I ain't armed . . ."

Hardesty slowly lowered his old gun and eased the hammer down with his thumb. Contempt blazed from his slitted eyes.

"I ort ter, yuh yellow-bellied skunk! Hank Henderson's blood is as much on yore soul as it is on the soul of that carrion lyin' there. So yuh thought I'd fall fer the same trick yuh pulled on Hank, eh?"

"Don't kill me . . ." whimpered Bland, hands shaking high over his head, "Turn me over to the law . . . I'll turn state's evidence . . . it was Morley's idear . . . framin' Henderson and you . . ."

Hardesty wrenched his eyes from the fear-crazed face and saw an excited group of gaping spectators closing in.

"What the hell?" demanded Sheriff Peasely, a puzzled frown on his square brown face as he shouldered through the crowd, looking uncertainly from Bland to Hardesty and then down at Morley.

"Bland's just confessed that he and Morley murdered Henderson through a frame-up and tried to get Hardesty the same way," babbled Ed Sandberg into Peasely's ear as he grabbed the big sheriff by the arm and tried to twist him around.

"Calm yoreself, Ed . . . le'me have that six-gun, Dad . . . now, Ed, what's it all about?"

Still shaking like a leaf, panting and perspiring, the little district attorney began to get control of himself, but not much.

"Dad's proved it—he's proved it," he chattered.

"Proved what? demanded the sheriff, frowning perplexedly.

"That his theory is right. That Morley and Bland framed and murdered Henderson. Bland's just admitted it. Dad figured out that they tricked Henderson into drawing on an unarmed man while the armed man stood behind Hank and poured lead into him with impunity. That's make it self-defense, see, Sheriff?"

Sandberg mopped the sweat drops from his bald head, and went on:

"Just to prove to me that he was right, Dad inveigled them into a gun-fight, figuring they'd try the same trick on him . . . they did, too . . . only Dad ignored the unarmed man in front and beat the armed man to the shot by whirling around . . . if Dad'd guessed wrong, he'd been killed by the man in front, Bland, see, Ed?"

"That's right only . . ." Bland whined like a whipped dog "Only Morley planned it all . . . I didn't want ter go through with it . . ."

"That's enough confession fer me," blurted out Sheriff Peasely, handing back Hardesty his gun and snapping a pair of steel bracelets on Bland's shaking wrists. "Come along, yuh spreadin' adder. Yo're lucky ter get court justice instead o' six-gun justice like yo're pardner got."

"And I want to question him, too, about the disappearance of Mrs. Green's yearlings, Sheriff," Sandberg jabbered.

"I'll tell yer where we hid 'em," called out Bland as the sheriff led him off. "I'm goin' ter throw myself on the mercy of the court . . . but Morley planned that cattle rustlin' job too . . ."

Old Dad Hardesty gazed thoughtfully for a minute at the sheriff leading his prisoner off, and chewed the ends of his gray mustache. Then his eyes dropped to his six-gun, still in his hands, and frowned.

"I shore hated ter do it, old pardner," he said shaking his head sadly.

"Hated to do what?" demanded Sandberg.

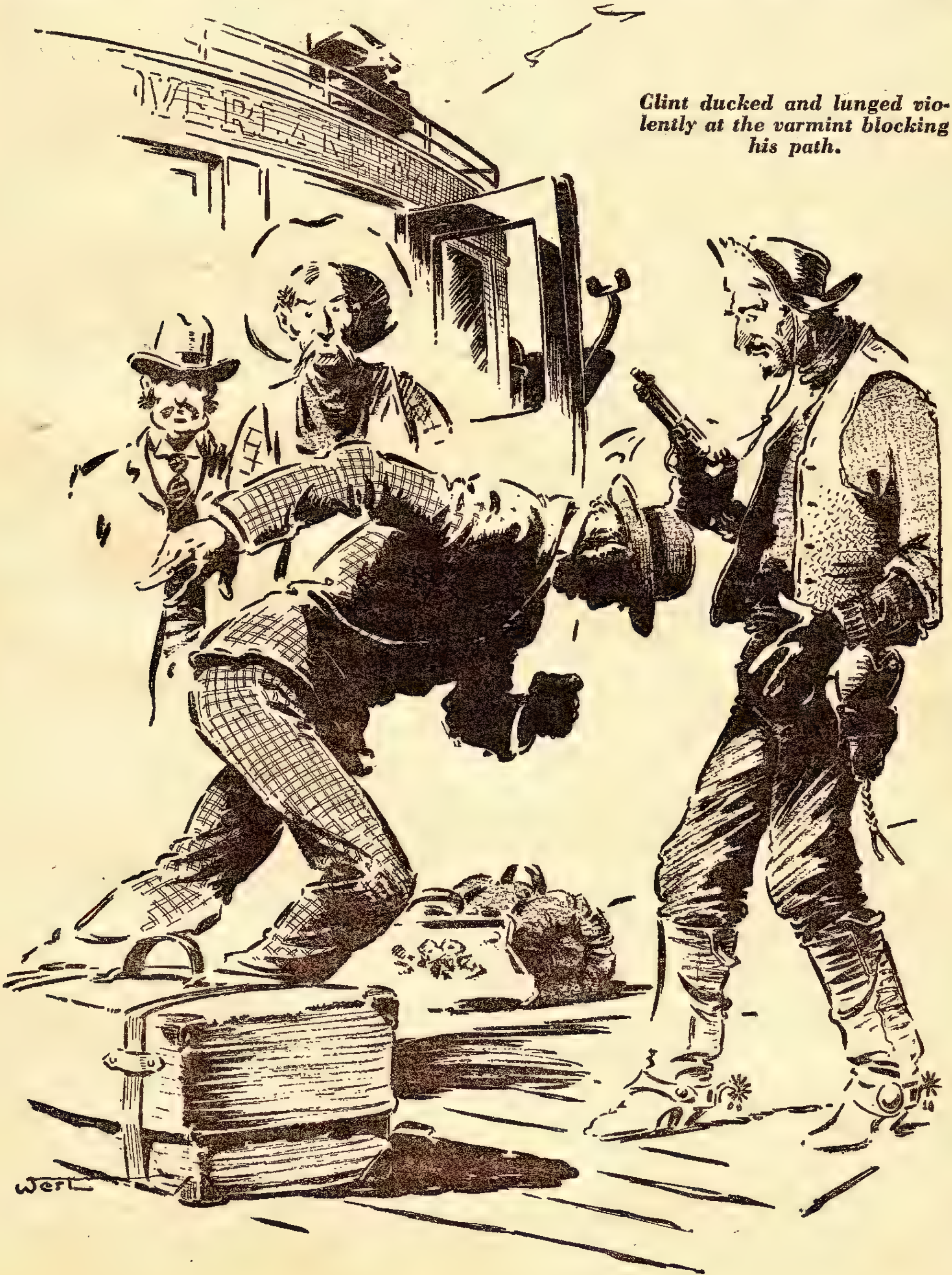
"Why ter humiliate this old six-gun by askin' it ter remove from this terrestial sphere a sidewinder low enough ter steal a widder's dogies. Oh, well . . ." the old ranger dropped the Colt into the holster, and the suggestion of a smile flickered over his leather-brown face. "I reckon nobody'll have ter soil a good six-gun on that other varmint Peasely's leadin' off . . . guess a bit o' hemp'll do that job."

THE EDUCATED LOBO

By WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER

You had to be a hellion with fist and gun when you took the job of teaching the Yellowjacket school.

CLINT DYER stuck his head into a potful of trouble clear up to his neck when he took the job of teaching the Yellowjacket school. He found that out the minute he rode into town on the stage and stepped down to face a sour-visaged gent with a pair of agate-hard eyes, the brace of guns on his hips thonged down



Clint ducked and lunged violently at the varmint blocking his path.

in the manner of a professional killer.

"You the new school dad?" the gunman snarled.

"Yeah," Clint nodded, angered by the man's overbearing manner. "What's biting you?"

"Nothing's biting me, but something that looks like a chunk of lead'll be biting you if you don't get back on the stage. We ain't having no school in Yellowjacket."

"That so?" Clint said with deceptive mildness. "Who's talking?"

"Slinger Beck talking," the man grated, and patted the worn butt of his right hand gun. "This hogleg's backing up what I say. Now climb back into that stage before I go to work on you. Never mind throwing down this jasper's bags, Ed," he said to the driver.

Clint had expected something like this, but not so soon. He knew the woman teacher had left last spring before school was out, and he was the second man to have a try at the job this fall, but he hadn't found out what was back of the trouble. Now he grinned at the stage driver. "Looks like this burg don't take much to education."

"You're damned right we don't," Beck growled, and drew a gun. "Get moving."

Clint shrugged. "That's a mighty powerful talking point you got there in your fist, mister." He started to turn back to the stage, stopped, and looked down at his feet in disgust. "Doggone that shoe lace. Always coming untied." He knelt, five feet in front of Beck, and out of the corner of his eyes, saw the gunman lower his gun, saw the puzzled expression in the yellow eyes, and in that instant Clint charged, head down.

Beck's gun roared, its thunder pounding against Clint's ears as his head rammed into the gunman's middle. There was the whistle of breath being driven from Beck's body. For one scant second he stood paralyzed, fighting to draw breath back into his lungs. It took Clint just that second to smash a fist into Beck's jaw and knock him flat on his back into the dust of the street, his head cracking against the sharp edge of the sidewalk. He lay there for half a minute, his yellow eyes glassy. When he finally shook his head and sat up, he was staring into the menacing bore of one of his own guns. The other was stuck into Clint's waist band.

"You don't fight so well without your hardware, do you?" Clint grinned down at him as he eared back the hammer. "Now it's your turn to do a little listening. I'm aiming to stay in Yellowjacket as long as I want to, and teach the school, which means I'm not listening to any hombre who's nothing like as tough as he thinks he is. Now get up and mosey on."

Beck got to his feet, reeling a little as he slunk away.

"Damn it," the stage driver said admiringly, "I never saw a man move so fast."

"Had to," Clint said. "Now that you know I'm aiming to stay, how about handing down my bags?"

YELLOWJACKET'S main street was deserted. That puzzled Clint. The arrival of the stage in such a town usually brought a crowd. For all the appearance the town gave of being deserted, he had the feeling his ruckus with Beck had been watched. He picked up his bags, nodded to the driver, and stepped into the hotel.

"I want a room," he said belligerently, wondering if he'd have to fight the clerk for it.

"Sure." The clerk shoved the register across the counter. "I reckon you're the new school teacher."

Clint signed his name and slammed the pen down. "I suppose you're going to tell me Yellowjacket doesn't need a school."

"Not me," the clerk shook his head. "That's Bull Ainsley's line of gab. I've got a ten-year-old kid who ain't got no book learning at all. If Bull keeps chasing the teachers out, I reckon I'll have to move somewhere else so he can get a little education."

"Ainsley? That gun packer I just had the setto with said his name was Beck."

"Sure. Ainsley gives the orders and Beck does the dirty work. That's the way things run in Yellowjacket."

"What's the matter with Ainsley? A school can't hurt anybody."

"Hell, I dunno what's the matter with him. He owns the Paradise Bar and half the town. Just plain ornery, I reckon. Meaner'n ——" Suddenly he stopped and bit his lip in the manner of a man who has already talked too much. He picked up a key and tossed it to Clint. "Second door to the right," he said, and jerked his thumb toward the stairs.

A hell of a note, Clint thought as he scrubbed off the dust of the long stage ride, when a teacher gets jumped by a gun fighter the minute he hits town. He was buttoning up a clean shirt when a knock sounded on his door. He opened it to see the hotel clerk standing in the hall.

"Pete Kramer wants you," the clerk said. "He's the chairman of the school board. "You'll find him in the bank. Half a block south of the Paradise."

"Thanks." Clint shut the door and finished dressing. When he put on his coat he saw that Beck's bullet had sliced a neat hole between the second and third button. Grimly he picked up one of Beck's guns and slipped it into his waist band.

Clint left the hotel and as he crossed the porch of the Paradise, wondered what sort of hell hound this Bull Ainsley was. It didn't make sense that he'd sic his gunslick on to a teacher just because he was ornery. Maybe Peter Kramer knew the answer.

"You the new school teacher?" the teller asked as Clint stepped into the bank. "Mr. Kramer's waiting for you," he added when Clint nodded.

"Mr. Dyer," a tall, bony faced man called from the door of a back room, and held out his hand. Clint shook it, and Kramer motioned him into the room. "I thought you'd like to meet the school board," Kramer went on. "Mr. Doney and Mr. Layton."

Doney was short and pudgy, Layton almost as tall as Kramer, his head as bald and freckled as a turkey egg. Good honest men, Clint told himself as he sat down, but not fighting men.

Kramer took a cigar from his coat pocket, bit off the end and rolled it between his fingers for a time before he spoke. "You look like you'll do," he said finally. "A teacher in Yellowjacket's got to be a scrapper, and the way you handled Slinger Beck, I'd say you were."

"What's this all about?" Clint demanded. "A gun slick tells me to roll my tail out of town, and then I find out a saloon keeper named Bull Ainsley runs things and Beck works for him. What you need is a two-gun sheriff."

"That's right," Kramer nodded somberly. "It's a bad situation, Dyer, a bad situation."

He kept on rolling the cigar between his fingers. Doney and Layton looked down at the floor, and neither spoke.

"Well?" Clint said irritably.

"You'll have about a dozen kids," Kramer was staring out of the window. "All we'll ask is for you to learn 'em something and make 'em toe the mark."

"What about Ainsley?" Clint shouted, exasperated at Kramer's hedging.

"He'll give you trouble." Kramer spread his hands as if it were a matter he couldn't do anything about. "We don't have a sheriff within fifty miles of here, and he won't come just because Ainsley runs the teacher out. We got a town marshal. Blacksmith named Robbins. Don't reckon he's taking Ainsley's money, but he sure won't do much."

There was fear here, live, terrible fear. Kramer might as well have said that if Clint Dyer stuck, he'd have to lick Bull Ainsley. Clint understood that then, and only asked, "What's back of Ainsley's trying to keep the school from running?"

"I don't rightly know," Kramer shook his head gloomily. "Just part of his game to drive everybody out of town. Folks with families don't stay where they can't send their kids to school, not nowdays. It don't make sense. If everybody goes, he don't get business." Kramer looked at Clint then, and there was pleading in his deep set eyes. "You've got to hang on, Dyer. Lem and Jud here, and me, we've got kids in school. We've lived most of our lives in this valley. Everything we got is here. Ainsley's bought up most of Yellowjacket. He's offered us about half what we got invested, but by hell, we're not going."

Clint knew then that this was what Kramer and the others had really wanted to say. Somehow, they hoped, this school teacher could do the job they weren't men enough to do.

"I don't like being pushed around," Clint grinned as he stood up. "I'll do my best."

"If we can help—" Doney began hesitantly.

"I'll make out," Clint broke in. "Think I'll have a talk with Mr. Bull Ainsley. So long."

"You can't do that, Dyer," Kramer cried. "Ainsley'll—"

"Reckon he won't," Clint grunted. "Sometimes it's a good idea to spit in a coyote's eye before you take him on. I'm gonna do my spitting right now."

HE left then, striding down the sidewalk with the flowing grace of a man who has lived the bulk of his life under the sun and with the breath of the wind upon his cheeks. He shouldered through the batwings, and in one quick glance saw that the saloon was empty except for the barkeep.

"What'll it be?" the apron asked as Clint stepped up to the bar.

"I'll take Bull Ainsley," Clint raised his voice. "Where is he?"

"You'll what?" Then the barkeep recognized Clint. He stepped back, and his face went a shade paler. "Hold on now, don't start nothing."

"I want Ainsley." Clint slammed his fist down on the bar until the glasses rattled. "You going to call him, or do I climb over there and knock a couple of chins off your jaw?"

"I'm Ainsley," a bass voice rumbled. "Who's wanting me?"

Clint swung around to face the heavy-set man who had come out of the back room. His name was well given, Clint saw, for he was a bull of a man, not tall, but tremendous of body and head. His little red eyes, set too close together astride his fat nose, were glittering ominously.

Clint stepped back so that he could catch any quick move the barkeep made, and let his eyes play contemptuously over the saloon man. "So you're Ainsley," he said, and his voice was like a slap in the face. "You look about like I figured. Bull's no name for you. They out to call you Toad."

"Who the hell are you?" Ainsley bellowed. "I ain't taking no gab like that of nobody."

"I reckon you will," Clint sneered. "A gent who tries to keep the kids of this town from getting a schooling wouldn't be man enough to do anything about a little name-calling."

Then recognition bloomed in the man's red eyes. "You—you—hell, you don't look like no school dad."

"Maybe I don't look like one, but that's what I am, and I'm telling you, Ainsley, I'm aiming to teach that school."

Ainsley laughed, a booming laugh that echoed the length of the saloon. "That's what you think, mister. Yellowjacket ain't having no school."

"Why, Ainsley?" Clint grated.

"This is a man's town, fella. No place for kids and women. Schools keep families around, and I'm driving them out. They hurt my business. Women keep men from drinking. To hell with 'em. If they want schooling, let 'em go somewhere else."

"You're lying, Ainsley, as fast as that fat tongue of yours can wobble, and I'm aiming to find out what your real game is. I'm staying. The only way you can keep me from teaching Yellowjacket's school is to shoot me in the back, and that'd bring the sheriff in here pronto, which same you don't want."

Clint wheeled and stalked out. There was no sound in the saloon when the batwings slapped shut behind him, no sound save the audible breathing of the barkeep.

IT was a typical schoolhouse, Clint found the next morning. Two rows of double desks, knife scarred and worn, with a pot-bellied stove in the middle. The teacher's desk was in front. There was a globe, a map of the United States that hung on the wall, and two long blackboards.

For a moment Clint stood in the doorway surveying the room ruefully. Then he hung his Stetson on a nail in the back, walked up the aisle, and wiped the dust off his desk.

Kramer had said there'd be a dozen kids. By nine o'clock they were there, the dozen of them, running from two little six-year-old girls to a fifteen-year-old boy. Clint rose and stood beside his desk, letting his eyes play over the seated children, smiling a little as he met their expectant stares. Then the dozen became thirteen, for a stocky man came in and slumped down in a back seat. No boy this, but a man, probably twenty or twenty-one. There seemed something vaguely familiar about him, but for the moment Clint couldn't place it.

Clint began to get their names. Mary Doney, Carl Layton, Jimmy Moore, and on to the big youth in the back seat.

"Gus Ainsley," he said loudly, and stared at Clint belligerently.

That was it, Bull Ainsley's boy. Much like his father, this Gus, tremendous of shoulder and arms, big-headed, the same little red eyes and fat nose.

"Aren't you just a little old to be coming to school?" Clint smiled. He saw through the game, and he knew exactly what was coming.

"Naw," Gus rumbled. "I ain't twenty-one yet. Won't be till next month. I got a right to git ejicated."

"I guess you have," Clint nodded. "Sounds like you need it." As he turned and walked back to his desk, a nervous titter swept over the room. "We'll have to work hard," he said. "We're a month late getting started, and—" He stopped, his eyes on Gus Ainsley. This was the showdown within five minutes from the time school had taken up. Young Ainsley had taken tobacco and paper from his pocket and was rolling a cigarette.

"I guess you're big enough to smoke, Gus," Clint said, "but not in here."

"The hell I ain't," young Ainsley sneered, and struck a match.

"Don't light that," Clint called sharply.

Gus laughed. "Who's stopping me? You ain't, mister," and touched the flame to the tip of his cigarette.

Clint went down the aisle in three strides, jerked the smoke from Ainsley's lips, and ground it out with his heel. Gus muttered a curse, reared up out of his seat and lunged at Clint, ham-like fists flying.

Another of Bull Ainsley's efforts to keep the school from running. That thought ran through Clint's mind as he ducked Ainsley's blow, and smashed a hard right to the other's fat nose. If he were licked, here in his own schoolroom in front of his pupils, his first day of teaching in Yellowjacket would be his last. But he wasn't going to take a licking, Clint Dyer swore, not with so much depending on it.

Gus bore in, his nose running a crimson stream, got in a punishing blow to the side of Clint's face. He charged now like a hate-crazed grizzly. Clint pivoted away. Gus crashed into the stove, brought down the pipe in a shower of soot, and Clint knocked him flat on hs back with a short, fierce punch to his jaw. For a moment he lay in the aisle, shaking his head dazedly, the specks of soot settling on his face making him look as if he had black measles.

"Come on, hombre," Clint jeered, "come on and fight."

Ainsley clambered to his feet, bruised lips drawn away from his teeth like a snarling cougar. They were at it again, swapping hard, meaty blows. Clint was barely conscious of the boys yelling at him, "Come on, teacher. Sock him."

Clint gave way before the rushes of his heavier opponent. He backed through the door, ducking, pivoting, slashing out with rights and lefts, giving more punishment than he received. He closed an eye, tasted his own blood on his lips, stepped off the porch, and still Gus came on, confident now that he had Clint on the run.

The boys clustered on the porch, silent as they saw their teacher fight a retreating battle, suddenly broke into cheers as Clint, taking advantage of Gus' confidence, got under Ainsley's guard with a vicious right that snapped his head back. He sank his left in Gus' stomach, straightened him up with another right to the jaw. Young Ainsley's knees buckled, and he slumped to the worn earth of the playground, his face a hideous mass of livid bruises and half clotted blood, all fight gone from him.

"You didn't come here to go to school, did you, Gus?" Clint glared down. "Now you can go back to tell your dad he'll have to think of something else."

Slowly Gus got to his feet. "You'll get something else, all right," he mumbled, and lurched away.

"Gosh, teacher," ten-year-old Carl Layton shrilled, "you sure did take him."

Clint pumped a basin of water, and washed the blood from his face. When he raised his head he saw that the boys had clustered around him, staring in frank admiration. It was Dick Kramer, the fifteen-year-old, who spoke first.

"We're mighty glad you licked Gus, teacher. Reckon you'll stay now. Gus can just about lick anybody in town, and he's been bragging what he was gonna do to you. We want some schooling, and long as Bull Ainsley keeps driving the teachers out, we can't get none."

"You're going to get it this winter, son, if I can give it to you," Clint grinned at the boys. "Let's go in and fix that stove pipe. About next month we might get a northeaster, and we'll sure need some heat."

It was after school that evening that Mary Doney loitered until the other children had gone. Then she came up to Clint's desk and said hesitantly, "Beth Ainsley wants to talk to you, teacher."

Clint mentally raised his eyebrows at mention of the girl's name. Seemed as if he'd run into somebody named Ainsley ever since he'd come to Yellowjacket.

"Sure, I'll talk to her," Clint nodded.

"She was scared to come," Mary giggled, and ran out.

Fifteen minutes later Beth Ainsley came in, and everything that Clint had pictured about her was wrong. She was about eighteen, he guessed. Blue-eyed, slim-waisted, she had none of the features that characterized Bull Ainsley and his son, Gus. She walked down the aisle rapidly, and almost fearfully, Clint thought, as if she were afraid of her welcome.

"I expected you to tell Mary you had seen enough of the Ainsleys," she said soberly.

Clint rose and gestured toward a chair. "I didn't expect an Ainsley to be as charming as you," he smiled.

"Mr. Dyer, I'm not really an Ainsley." She spoke rapidly, and did not take the chair. "My mother married Bull Ainsley when I was a child, and he took care of me after she died, but I hate him and I hate Gus for what they're trying to do."

"I think it leans a little to the rotten side myself," Clint agreed.

"I know you'll stay, after the way you've handled Slinger Beck and Gus, and talked to Bull yesterday."

"I figure on staying all right, but I wish I knew Bull's game," Clint said thoughtfully.

"That's what I came to tell you," Beth leaned forward eagerly. "Bull used to be a gold prospector. He made one strike, came here five years ago and bought the Paradise. Then last spring he found several chunks of float along the river bank that had been uncovered by a cloudburst. He thinks the town sets on a valuable vein, thinks so enough that he's trying to drive everybody out so he can work it. His fighting the school is just one way to get the families out of here."

"So that's it," Clint murmured. He remembered Kramer saying Ainsley was trying to buy everybody out. "Bull must be mighty sure he's got a good thing."

"He's positive," Beth nodded. "Says the vein runs right under the town. Now I've got to go. If Bull knew I'd told you—," she laughed nervously. "Well, anyhow, I thought you ought to know. You're the one man brave enough to fight Bull, but be careful. He's afraid of you now, and that makes him dangerous."

She went out, walking quickly away from the school, and plainly worried that she might be seen. Clint watched her from the door until she disappeared, and with her going the room seemed strangely empty. If Bull Ainsley harmed her. . . . Then he shook his head. No, in this country even a man like Ainsley would know better than to hurt a girl.

That night in his hotel room, Clint lay awake a long time wondering what he should do. Until his talk with Beth, he had thought the saloon man would give up when he learned that Clint Dyer was a man he couldn't bluff. He knew better now. With a fortune at stake, Ainsley would stop at nothing, and he held all the aces with only one man and a spineless town against him. The thing to do, Clint decided, was to let Ainsley play his hand out.

Clint couldn't have foreseen what was to happen. He didn't know what to think when the kids failed to show up for school the next morning. He heard a gun roar from the south side of town, another a few minutes later from the other side. By nine o'clock not one child had made his appearance. Clint waited until ten o'clock, anger mounting within him. Yesterday he'd thought the kids were on his side. Now it looked as if they didn't want to come any more than Ainsley wanted them to.

When it was ten, Clint slammed down the book he was reading and strode the two blocks to Main Street. He aimed to have it out with Kramer. At least the board members could have made their kids come. He rounded the corner of the hotel, and stopped dead still. There was trouble. He should have known that when he'd heard the shots.

A KNOT of men were clustered in front of the town jail across the street and half a block south. Kramer, Layton, Doney, Lafkin the hotel clerk, the big marshal, Robbins and a half dozen others. Clint knew, even as he crossed the street, that whatever had happened was the cause of the kids not coming.

Doney was talking as Clint came up. His tone was violent and bitter, strangely so for a man as mild-appearing as Doney.

"I'm going after 'em if you haven't got the guts," Doney raged. "It was my kid they shot."

"We'll get 'em," Robbins said cautiously. "I'm just saying we oughtta wait till we get more men."

Doney's kid shot? The words sent a fierce blast of anger through Clint's body.

"What was shot, Doney? Mary?" Clint asked.

Doney whirled at the sound of Clint's voice. "No, the boy, Jim."

"Bad hurt?"

"He'll live. Beck gave him a slug through the leg."

"Beck?" Clint cried. "Why should he shoot a nine-year-old boy?"

"Ainsley's orders," Kramer said hoarsely. "He sent his men out this morning with word that no kid was to go to school. Most of 'em stayed home, but Doney's boy went anyway."

"I told Jim and Mary not to go," Doney shouted.

"I don't think Jim was aiming to go to school," Robbins put in. "I saw the whole business. He went into the back of the saloon. He came running out about five minutes later with a piece of paper in his hand. Beck chased him but he couldn't catch the kid. Then he shot Jim, came up to the boy, grabbed the paper and hiked back to the saloon."

For a second Clint stared at the marshal. In that second he guessed some of the truth, and he saw what had to be done.

"I'm going in," Doney began, and stopped as Clint held up his hand.

"Wait. I've got a hunch what might have been on that paper. I've got a bigger hunch that this was the last thing Ainsley wanted to happen. He's avoided gun smoking because he didn't want the sheriff to come nosing in. Now he'll know he can't keep the sheriff out, so he'll aim to finish this fight up now it's started. He'll think we'll bust in, and he'll be in position to wipe us out. Then he'll give the sheriff a different yarn when the lawman gets here."

"I'm going in," Doney insisted stubbornly.

"That's not the way," Clint shook his head. "We've got to get him into the open. Where are the kids?"

"The boys are in Layton's store," Kramer said. "The girls are home."

"That's good," Clint nodded. "The boys and me will go to school. When Ainsley sees that, I reckon he'll come out."

"Hold on," Kramer said sharply. "I'm not aiming for the rest of the boys to get shot."

"I've got a feeling the kids of this town have more guts than their dads," Clint retorted. "I know how a man like Ainsley figures. He's into it up to his neck now. A little more won't be any worse. He aims to stop the school at any cost, and when he sees me and the boys go in, he'll come out a raring. That's where you gents can take over and make it a finish fight."

Clint turned on his heel and started for Layton's store. "Ainsley'll start shooting when he sees you and the boys," Kramer shouted.

"We'll come in from the back," Clint called over his shoulder, and kept on.

Six boys were gathered in front of Layton's store. They shouted as Clint came in. "We gonna have school here?" Carl Layton shrilled.

"Wouldn't be a very good place," Clint shook his head.

"Sure wish we could get a crack at Bull Ainsley," Dick Kramer said bitterly. "He shot Jim Doney."

"That's what I came to tell you. Your dads can clean up Ainsley's crooks if we can get them out of the saloon. That's your job. You boys game?"

"Sure," they cried eagerly.

"Then we'll head for the schoolhouse. If I've sized Ainsley up right, he'll come after us. We'll go around back. It's dangerous, and if you—"

"Lead out, teacher," young Kramer shouted. "We're right behind you."

Clint led the way, skirting the edge of town, wiggling through the tall grass on their stomachs as they crossed the vacant lot behind the school house. That this was the dangerous moment Clint well knew. Ainsley could see the front of the building from the back of the saloon, but the chance had to be taken.

"Line up, little ones in front," Clint ordered, "and run like a ringtailed grizzly was after you."

They scooted around the corner and into the school house. Clint held his breath as each one disappeared, but it wasn't until Dick Kramer left his hiding place that the first shot rang out.

THEN Clint followed. Lead screamed past his ears and thudded into the school house wall, but he made the door and shut it behind him.

"A little close, boys," he grinned, and walked up the aisle. He stood beside a window so that he could watch the playground in front of the school house. One thing worried him. He had no confidence in the townsmen. If they didn't stop Ainsley, there was no telling what would happen.

"This America of ours is a great country," Clint began, and didn't stop when gun shots ripped apart the morning quiet. "Those of us who believe in it have to fight for it just as we're fighting Bull Ainsley now. It's like back in the Revolution after George Rogers Clark had captured Cahokia and Kaskaskia. Colonel Hamilton was up in Vincennes with a British army. It was winter. For miles Clark and his men had to march through water up to their middle. It looked as if they didn't have a chance, but—"

Clint Dyer's words died in his throat. Bull Ainsley and Slinger Beck were running down the alley straight toward the schoolhouse.

"Lie down on the floor," Clint ordered, and raced toward the door, palming the .45 he'd worn since he'd taken it from Slinger Beck.

Clint didn't wait to see if he were obeyed. Ainsley and Beck had to be stopped before they reached the schoolhouse. They raised their guns when they saw Clint.

"You're cashing in, teacher," Ainsley bellowed. Even as the saloonman dropped hammer, Clint blasted the life from Slinger Beck with a slug through his chest.

Ainsley fired, and then again, bullets ripping into the schoolhouse wall. Clint felt the rush of air as they whipped past his face, heard their scream of death as he faced a man gone kill-crazy mad. Again Clint pressed trigger. Ainsley reeled, convulsively triggered three bullets into the ground with fingers too weak to lift his gun. Then his knees buckled, and his body sprawled lifeless on the ground.

The townsmen were running toward Clint, Kramer in the lead. They came up to Clint, and stared down at the two dead men.

"You did it,"

"I thought you gents were taking care of Ainsley," Clint said.

"He and Beck got through," Kramer answered. "Robbins cashed in, and Lafkin got a slug in his leg, but we sure stopped the rest of Ainley's outfit."

Clint felt a tug on his sleeve. "Say, teacher, what did George Rogers Clark do when he got to Vincennes?" Carl Layton asked.

"You be here on the dot tomorrow morning, and we'll finish that history lesson." Clint turned to Doney. "Let's go see how that boy of yours is."

Ten minutes later Clint Dyer was standing beside Doney looking down at the white, sleeping form of Jim Doney. Then he raised his eyes, and saw Beth Ainsley sitting on the other side of the bed.

"He'll be all right," Beth whipered. "Don't wake him."

Clint nodded, and tiptoed out. Doney stayed beside the bed, but Beth followed Clint.

"Bull Ainsley—" Clint began, and suddenly found he couldn't say it.

"He's dead?"

Clint nodded.

No regret came to Beth's face. "I knew it would be that way," she murmured. "It had to be that way."

"I wonder why Beck shot Jim," Clint said. "It wasn't the way Ainsley had been playing his cards."

"It was partly my fault," the girl answered. "When Jim and Mary didn't go to school this morning, I told them about the gold. I don't know why I did. I guess I just had to talk to somebody. I said Bull had a map of the town with some notes on the way he thought the gold lay. Jim got it into his head that if he got that map, Bull would let up, so he sneaked into the saloon, found the map, and ran out. Beck started after him, and when he saw he couldn't catch him, he must have lost his head and used his gun."

"That's about the way I had it figured," Clint nodded. He looked at her a moment without speaking, and marvelled, as he had the first time he had seen her, that a girl as sweet and beautiful as Beth Ainsley could have been related to the man who had caused so much evil. "What will you do now, Beth?"

Clint held his breath as he waited for her answer. It seemed terribly important to him that she stay in Yellowjacket.

"I'll live with the Doneys," Beth answered. "They've given me more of a home these last years than Bull did."

Suddenly all the trouble of these last hours dropped far behind.

"There won't be anything to keep me from giving these kids a good school now." He took her slim hand in his big one. "I've got a hunch, Beth, that these months ahead are going to be mighty important ones for us."

Beth gave no answer, but she didn't remove her hand, and Clint saw by the quick color in her cheeks that she knew exactly what he meant.

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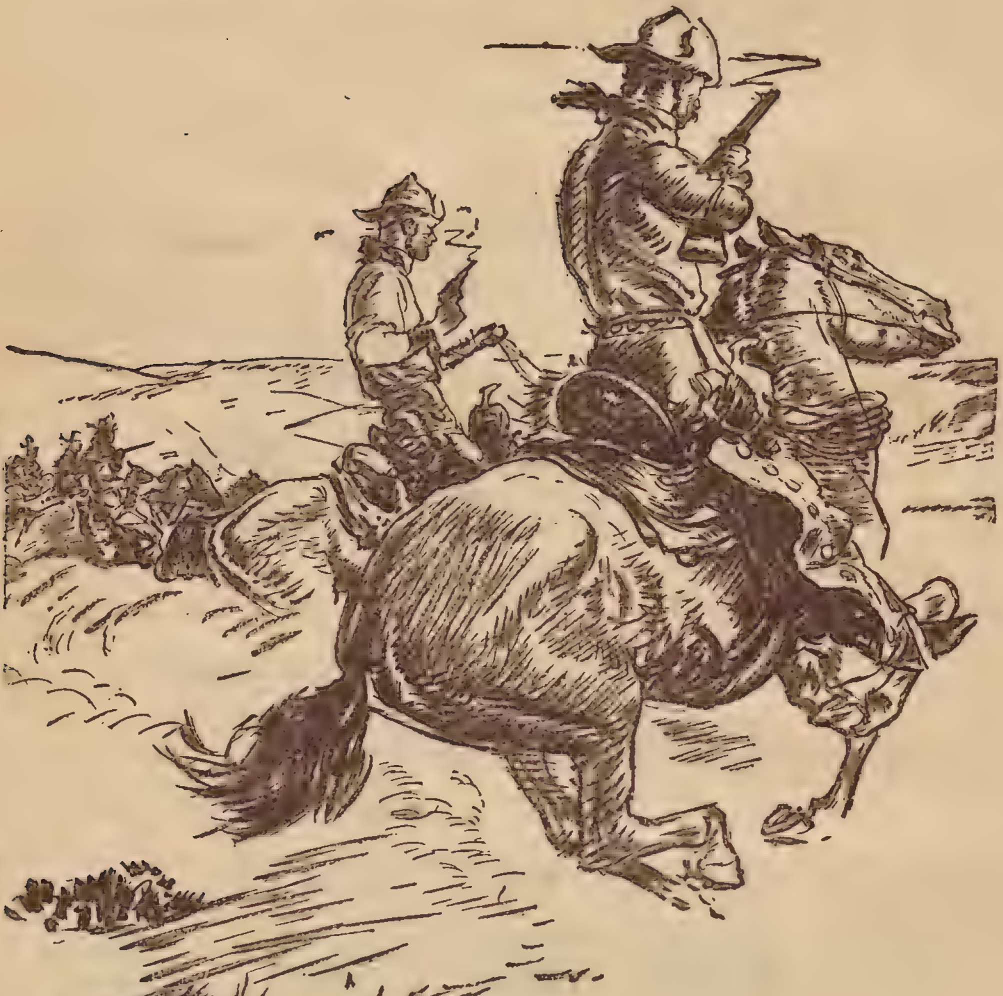
BOOTHILL BUYS A ROUNDUP

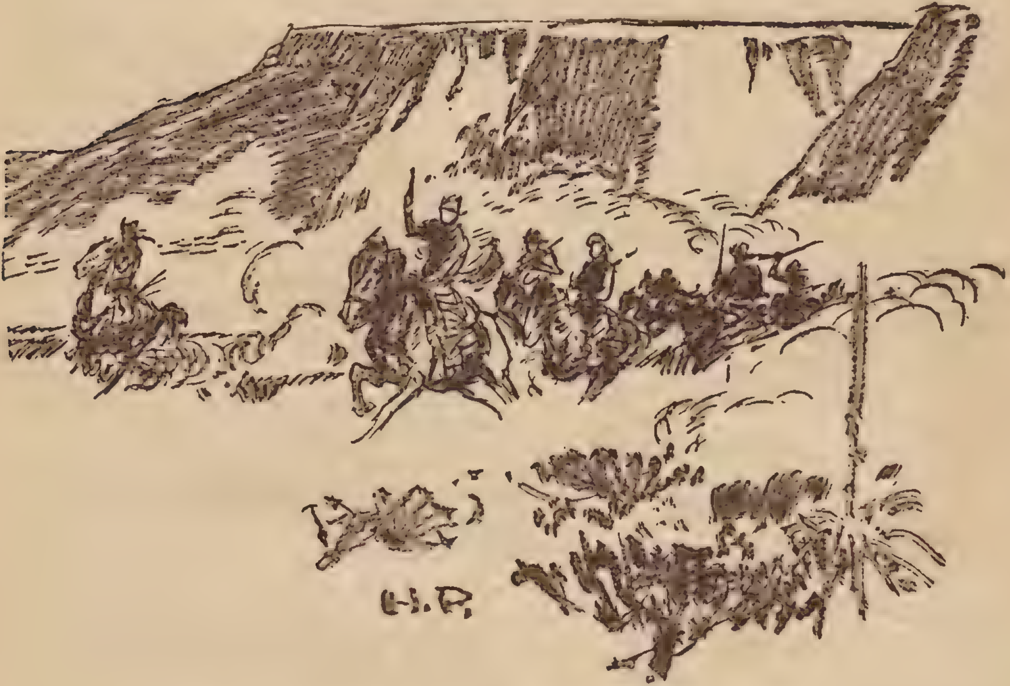
By J. E. GRINSTEAD



If you love the smell of smoke and the color of blood, J L Bar is your stompin' ground. Riley Kemp pulled up for a stay.

RILEY KEMP had ridden steadily west along flat Deadrock Valley since sunrise and it was now late afternoon. Far ahead of him he had seen what looked like a smudge on the horizon. It had developed into a tall screen of willows around a big water hole, with a few cottonwood trees here and there, and some houses. It made a pleasant scene, he thought. That would be the J L Bar ranch, for which he was heading.

He was within fifty yards of the high palisade horse corral when the gate opened. A slender, boyish figure led a horse out and closed the gate. Rile stopped, and a grin came to his handsome face. He knew



With guns flaming, Riley's men drove at the charging Muleshoe outfit, aiming to split their ranks wide open.

more about horses than a prairie dog knows about digging holes. That rangy old sunfisher was going to put on a show. The slim rider had not seen Rile, but flashed into the saddle, and then—flashed out again. That bronc really went into the air. Then, when the rider was off, it calmly went to cropping grass. Rile was getting a kick out of this.

The rider lay quite still on the ground. Rile became alarmed, dismounted and ran over. "Hey, Cap," he said, "did he bust you?"

The figure sat up and shook the blackest head that Riley had ever seen, then stared at him with a pair of lovely brown eyes: "Who—who are you?"

"I'm Riley Kemp. I rid up just as you fork—I mean, mounted that old skyrocket." Rile's hat was in his hand now. The look on his face was funny to see.

"I'm Ella Lemon," she said, as she rose and brushed off the dust. "I'm not hurt. Just got the wind knocked out of me for a minute. I knew Old Rocket was mean, but he was the only thing in the pen, and I had to go some place, pronto. He wouldn't have thrown me, but I was thinking of something else. Following sort of a hunch."

"Yes'm," said Rile. "I have follered 'em some in my life. If you aim to follow yours any farther on that bronc, you better let me bust him some before you try it again."

"Oh, I can ride him when I pay attention to what I'm doing. How do you happen to be here? All the cowhands in the country are at the roundup. What outfit do you ride for?"

Her manner was straightforward.

"None, right now," replied Rile. "I just headed west, to look for a job."

"I see," she said, thoughtfully, as she looked him over. "I don't know if the J L Bar needs hands. It's fifteen miles to the roundup and the sun is about down. You could stay here tonight and go on in the morning. If Dad doesn't need a hand, some of the other ranchmen may. My hunch is that something bad has happened at that roundup today. I'm going to ride out to the north a way, and see what I can find out. You may ride along with me if you wish."

Rile certainly did. Also, he wished that the girl would not try to ride that old hellion, but she had caught the horse, and it stood quietly until she got into the saddle. Then it tried to put its head down to do its stuff, and couldn't. Ella jerked Rocket's head up, leaned over and lashed with her long, forked quirt. Then her spurs went in and bit deep. Rocket thought the Devil had mounted him, and tried to run from under it. Ella was quarter of a mile north of the ranch when Rile caught up with her. Neither of them spoke. They had ridden another half mile, when the girl jerked her mount to a stop: "Look!" she said. "Can you see those men out there?"

"Yes'm," said Rile. "There's six in the bunch, and three of 'em are leading packers."

"No." she cried. "That would mean that—"

"It might mean that the roundup was over," said Rile, "and some of the hands are coming in with camp kits on packers."

"No," she told him. "The roundup just started on our lower range day before yesterday, and last night they moved on to Cottonwood Canyon. I'm—I'm afraid that—"

"That somebody you like right smart has been hurt?" said Rile. The next moment he was sorry he said that, but he wanted to know if this beautiful creature was unattached.

"Yes," she replied. "The best man in the world—my father. And the next best, my two brothers." She was looking at Rile, and moisture was welling in her eyes. Rile's blue eyes lost the smile that usually was lurking in them. He stammered somewhat as he spoke:

"I—I didn't mean to talk loco Miss. If you'd like to, we can ride out that way and see what happened."

"Thank you," she said, and reining her horse around she led the way. They were within quarter of a mile of the riders when suddenly a tall man on a powerful horse spurred out of the group and galloped toward them.

"Oh, thank God!" cried Ella. "That's Daddy, and he isn't hurt."

Tall, gaunt, his once black hair and flowing mustache now streaked with silver, Joe Lemon skidded to a stop as they pulled up and waited. He shot Rile a keen glance from his piercing black eyes: "Who are you?"

"Riley Kemp is the name, I was heading for the J L Bar looking for work. I met the young lady on the range. She wanted to come and meet you and I came with her."

"I see," said Joe Lemon, gravely. "If you are the kind of man I want, I need you. Fall in, and we'll go on to the ranch."

"But—But, Daddy," faltered the girl. "You look—What has happened?"

"You got to be pretty game to take this, Baby," he said. "Your mother is the one that gets the worst jolt. We got to keep our chins up on her account. It has been ten years since your brother Bud and Red Perkins had a falling out over a burnt steer, and was both kilt. I was willing to let it pass, and I thought Bill Perkins was, but—Bill and his boys brought it up again today. George and Monty is riding hog-fashion on two of them lead braunks, and Ashur Ratcliff is on the other one. The Muleshoe outfit just ganged on 'em and murdered 'em."

One sharp cry of anguish, one tearing sob, and Ella controlled herself, and rode on in silence. At the ranch, Joe Lemon said in a kindly tone: "Just make yo'self at home, Rile. I'll talk to you when I can. Come on, Baby. We got to tell Mother."

Riley watched them walk off toward the old ranch house, and something about it took hold of him and shook him. He had heard of people like that, but never before had he seen them. Joe Lemon had not cursed and raved; nor raised his voice when he told Ella that Bill Perkins had taken one of his sons and three of his cowhands home, but there was that in his eyes which plainly said that the yellow Deadrock blossoms would be dyed with blood and scorched with fire before it was over.

RILEY KEMP met the men when they came in with their gruesome packs. The body of Ashur Ratcliff was carried into the bunkhouse, while the two brothers were carried into the grim, silent old ranch house. Gray haired Mrs. Lemon had not wept. Her once lovely face was set like gray stone, as she told the men where to set their burden. Rile glanced into the big living room and saw Joe Lemon, his wife and his daughter, in a close group, and heard Mrs. Lemon say: "Thank God, they have left us you, Joe. Ella and me couldn't square this thing."

As Rile went on to the bunkhouse he was doing some sober thinking. When Old Man Joe said if Rile was the right kind of man he could use him, he had meant but one thing. No man who was not a smoke-eater need apply for a job with the J L Bar now. Rile had seen smoke, but he didn't like it as a regular diet. If he had been working for the J L Bar when the mess came up, he would have stuck it out, but he was not. So, he meant to do what he could in return for his night's lodging, then when the burying was done he would ride.

Two of the five men who had come in with Joe Lemon were grizzled old punchers who had been on the spread for years. They were called Beef and Biscuits, because they always went together. Their real names had been forgotten. They were busy preparing the bodies of the two Lemon boys for burial, and would spend the night at the ranch house. Two of the others were Chip and Grinny. They too were partners, but not old, not grim, and not temperate in anything. As Rile and the three others sat in the bunkhouse, keeping watch over the bier of Ashur Radcliff, Chip suddenly spoke up: "Skinny, I'll play you two handed poker to see whether we ride out of this mess, or hang and rattle, and smoke it out. Want in on it, Tennessee?"

Tennessee Tyson was a gaunt, flat-cheeked, hard-eyed man of thirty or so. It was a long moment before he spoke. "Chip, mostly it don't bother me for a fool to let his mouth go off, but this ain't one of them times. I—"

"Aw, hell, Tennessee," said Chip, with a sheepish grin. "I didn't mean to harm. I just said that because I didn't know anything else to say. I know how you feel about Ashur, and I'm sorry, but—Come on, Grinny. Let's go see about the horse stock."

When they were gone, Tennessee said: "I reck'n that was pretty raw, but I couldn't take it. Chip and Grinny are all right. They are as game as men get. They had no thought of running out on the J L Bar. It was just foolish talk, but—he was my partner, and God didn't make but one like him." Tennessee nodded to Ashur's body, which lay on a bunk, covered with a blanket. "I couldn't stand disrespect for his dead body, but we all get callous out here." There was a light step outside the door, and Tyson quit talking. They looked up as Ella Lemon spoke at the door:

"Rile, I'd like for you to come to the house a little while." Rile had more time than anything else just then. He stepped out the door and they walked off toward the house together. The moon was nearing the full, and it accentuated the shadows in her black hair, and about her eyes, making her face look pale. Half way to the house she stopped: "I don't want you to go to the house. I want to ask a favor of you. I'm sure you have good judgment, and if you use it you will ride from the J L Bar when morning comes. I was afraid you would, and that is why I called you out here. I'd gladly take a gun and hunt down the men who murdered my brothers but Daddy would never let me do it. He'll go, but he'd never let me go along to look out for him. You know that when a ranchman can't attend a roundup, he sends somebody to rep for him, and look after his stuff. There is going to be a terrible bloody roundup soon in Deadrock. I have a deep interest in it, and I can't go. Won't you rep for me?"

"Why, I—I—"

"Wait," said Ella. "Don't tell me you won't do it. Think it over until morning, and then—"

"I wasn't going to say that," Rile told her. "I don't have to think one little minute to decide, but I don't understand—"

"You don't understand why I would ask such a favor of you when there are plenty of others. I don't understand it either. All I know is that I have more confidence in you than in any man on earth except my father. It is to protect him that I am asking you to do this. If you sign on, try to get Tennessee for a partner. He's the best man on the spread. I know that if you give me your word and your hand on it, nothing but death will stop you from keeping that word."

"I hope you are right about that," said Rile. "I'm giving you my word that I'll rep for you, and here's my hand on it."

She clasped his hand for a moment, released it, turned away without a word and started for the house. Twice she hesitated, as if about to turn back, then went on. Rile watched her until she disappeared in the shadows of the silent old house.

Next morning Rile made one of the crew of six who opened three graves, beginning before it was good daylight. At the burial Ella and her Mother stood a little apart until it was over, making no sound of grief. When it was over they returned to the house, to cry their hearts out in each other's arms.

The men set about saddling up to return to the roundup. There was nothing else that could be done. The cattle had to be worked. Rile was in an embarrassing spot. He had promised to rep for Ella, and he had no excuse to ride with the J L Bar. This was in his mind, when Joe Lemon, said: "It ain't no use for me to tell you what the J L Bar is up agin. The Muleshoe outfit is about twice as big as mine, and they are plenty tough, but we got to have a cold showdown. I wouldn't blame you if you rode out of the mess since you ain't been hired, but if you know which end of a gun smokes, and still want a job, you're hired."

"I'm hired," Rile replied, succinctly.

"All right. You'll have to ride your own mount to camp. All our saddlestock are in the remuda. When you get there you can rope out a saddle string. Let's ride."

Old Joe Lemon led the way alone, his chin up, and his keen eyes scanning the country ahead of him. He had fought Indians and rustlers in the old days, and hoped that the days of wars were over, but this had come up and he would meet it as he had always met emergencies.

Beef and Biscuits fell behind Old Man Joe. Chip and Grinny followed them, while Rile and Tyson rode the drag. They had gone a mile in silence when Tyson said: "Rile, you must love the smell of smoke and the color of blood to sign on with the J L Bar right now."

"No," replied Rile. "I don't like either one, but I like a square deal, and the way I understand this mess the J L Bar ain't getting one. I want a job, and if I went farther I might do worse. Mr. Lemon strikes me as being about all right."

"He's as square and game as any man

on earth," said Tyson. "Trouble with him is that he is so square he trusts others too much. He thinks this mess came up over something that happened ten years ago, but it didn't. Bill Perkins wants the J L Bar. The Muleshoe has miles of grass but very little water. Lemon got here first and took the lower end of the valley and most of the water."

"Water?" laughed Rile. "I hadn't seen any water for thirty miles before I reached the J L Bar. That's a good water hole at the ranch but cows can't go that far to get a drink."

"Deadrock Valley is queer country," said Tyson. "It is five or six miles wide and fifty miles long. It looks level, but it is severed by deep gorges, just cracks in the ground. In the gorges there are springs. Plenty of water, and windbrakes, where cows can get shelter in bad weather. The J L Bar is the best ranch in this part of Texas and Bill Perkins aims to get it."

"How can he get it by a range war?" asked Rile.

"Easy enough. Yesterday he got the two Lemon boys. Next, he'll get Old Man Joe. After that there will be just two women to run the J L Bar. Perkins will just let his cows drift onto the J L Bar range, and when the women give up the fight and quit, he'll buy it at his own price. No ranchman with any sense would want to buy a range war."

"What about the law?" asked Rile.

"All the law in these parts has been made and enforced by Joe Lemon and Bill Perkins, ever since the Indians were run out of it. The case might get into court. If it did, Perkins would produce plenty of witnesses to prove that the killing was in fair fight, and no jury of cowmen would convict him, when one of his own sons and three of his hands were killed in the fight."

"Looks bad," admitted Rile.

"It is bad. I'm staying in and taking a chance, hoping to square the death of Ashur. If you stay in just to see the J L Bar get a square deal, yore the kind of partner I want to take Ashur's place. Is it a deal?"

"Yes," said Rile, and he put out his hand. Tyson gripped it, and the pact was made. It lasted until one of them died. They rode on up the valley, which was green with the curly mesquite grass of early spring. Suddenly, Rile raised himself in his stirrups and looked ahead: "What is that break in the ground?"

"Five Mile Draw," replied Tyson. "There's a rough trail crossing on it. The main trail crosses five miles below here." While talking, Rile and Tyson had lagged a little, and were more than a hundred yards behind Joe Lemon when he and the two old punchers swung around a big thicket of weesatch that stood on the brink of the gorge just where the trail started down the south side of it. As they went out of sight, there was a blast of gunfire. Chip and Grinny jerked to a stop for a moment. Rile and Tyson drove in spurs and passed them. When they rounded the thicket, Beef and Biscuits were on the ground, over the body of Joe Lemon, while Joe's riderless horse stormed by them, to be caught by Chip and Grinny. A terrible oath burst from Tennessee's hard lips. Old Beef looked up and said: "They got him right through the head. Bushed him cold. We seen two of 'em running down the trail on foot, and shot at 'em, but they got away."

"Can you and Biscuits get the old man on his horse and take him home?" asked Rile.

"Shore we can get him home," said Beef, "but—no tellin' how many of them hellions is in that hole. You boys are apt to ride into a trap if you go in there."

"We'll take as many as we can get to, if there's a thousand," rapped Rile. "Come on, boys. Let's go before the trail gets cold." Rile spurred on down the steep trail. He had promised to rep for Ella, and he meant to do it.

II

RILE led on down the steep, rocky trail to where it crossed to the north side of a clear, running stream. There the trail turned east, following the smooth, level bottom of the gorge for two hundred yards, where it turned north again and climbed out a lateral draw. Fifty yards up the trail from the creek crossing, two men were getting a third into his saddle. Beef and Biscuits had crippled one of them. The cripple got into his saddle and headed up the trail. The others swung up and tried to run out of it, but they had no chance. Rile was among them, his gun was spouting flame. The cripple lurched from the saddle. There was nothing for the others but to turn and fight, and thinking they had only one man to contend with, they went at it with a will.

Rile had winged another, when Tyson reached his side. Then Chip and Grinny came storming into the mess. They were yelling like demons as they rode in, but they were too late for any fun. Two of the killers were dead. The third one was on the ground, his arms hanging limply at his sides, both of them broken by bullets. Chip chuckled: "Well, I'll be damned. Old Cotton Webb hisself, in pusson. Bein' moon-eyed that away, you'd orter know better than to try to prowl in the daytime. Now you have run into something—plumb hard. Next time—"

"Look out!" called Tyson. "There's more coming."

"Ain't nobody but Old Beef," drawled Grinny. "He heared a gun mess and just couldn't stay out of it."

The man on the ground appeared to be about forty. His hair was snow white, and his large eyes were a glassy gray. He didn't speak a word until Old Beef swung down and looked him over. "Cotton," he said, "I allers knowed you was low and mean but I never thought you'd bush and murder the best man in Texas. I seen Joe Lemon keep the dogs off'n you once when you would of hung if he had let the boys get at you. Now you have helped murder him."

"I—I had to do it," mouthed Cotton. "Perkins didn't ask me to do it, he told me to do it, and he's got enough on me to hang me four-five times. I didn't have no way out. Them other fellers," Cotton nodded to the two dead killers, "gets five hundred apiece for the job. I don't get nothin'. Bill knowed Old Man Joe would be coming back to the roundup this morning so he sends us in here to get him."

"So you didn't get a thing for the job," sneered the old puncher. "Don't worry, you'll get something. You know the insides of this mess, tell it."

"Tell it, hell," snarled Cotton. "Everybody that had any sense, except Joe Lemon, knowed what it was about. Perkins has got about a million cows, plenty of grass, and no water. His stock just barely made it through the winter, after the drouth last summer. If we ketch another dry year, he stands to lose everything he's got, and—Bill don't like to lose. So, he just figgered to bring up that old quarrel as an excuse, kill off Joe and his two boys, then help himself to all the water he wanted. They got the two boys yesterday when no one was looking. Now, we got Old Man Joe, and I reck'n Bill will be satisfied."

"Yes, you got Old Man Joe," said Beef, grimly, "and you played right smart hell when you done it, without helping Perkins much. Chip, get Cotton's rope off'n his saddle. It needs stretchin' some."

Cotton begged like a hound, but it did him no good. A few minutes later the killer's body was swinging from the end of his own rope. Beef spoke up: "Fellers, the Old J L Bar is in a bad mess and something has got to be did about it. Joe's dead, and a snake can't crawl straight without a head."

"Let me speak a little piece," said Tyson. "We all know that Old Man Joe never had a foreman. You been with the J L Bar about all the time, Beef, and are as near a foreman as he ever had. Thing is for you to take over and lead the deal."

"Hold it, Tyson," growled Beef. "Biscuits and me is the best pair of drag-followers in Texas, but we can't lead worth a damn. We have to be told what to do. I don't know any of the hands that could handle this mess. I like the way Rile barges into this little ruckus, and it looks like he could lead some. We ain't got time to find out what Joe's wife and Ella wants did. We just got to elect a foreman *ad interim,* as the lawyers says. So's not to hurt the feelin's of any of the old hands, I move that we elect Rile foreman, and—"

"That's all right with me," declared Tyson, "but there is only five of us here, and there's ten more at the roundup. They might want to vote if they knew about this."

"Shore might," admitted Beef, "but—in point of long service, I reck'n Biscuits and me would have about forty votes apiece. I got a proxy from Biscuits, and I hereby cast eighty votes for Rile, and I don't see what the hell the others can do about it. If you boys wants to make it unanimous, let's go."

"He gets my vote," said Tyson. "I'll take orders and follow. If it had not been for Rile, those killers might have gotten clean away."

"Count Grinny and me in on that," yelled Chip. "We'll foller Kemp until he starts to run from a fight, and I got an idea that'll be a damn' long time."

IT WAS a strange election, and a bit irregular, but every man there knew that Old Beef would make it stick—with his gun, if need be. The old puncher was using his head in the interest of the J L Bar.

"Boys," said Rile, "this is a pretty big job that you have wished on me and I'll need plenty of help. I'll just make you one promise. If Bill Perkins and his other two boys are alive when this roundup is over, I won't be." Rile swung his hat from his head as he made the promise. The sun flashed on his short, crinkly hair, and the fighting line of his jaw and chin. The hard light in his narrowed, cold blue eyes meant no good for the Muleshoe outfit. Those cowboys knew a fighter when they saw one. Tyson stepped forward and gripped Rile's hand. The two catamounts, sober-faced for once in their wild lives, followed him. Then Old Beef put out his horny fist: "Son, you have took over one more hell of a job, but when a man is in the right, he can get a tough job done. Tennessee can tell you a lot of things. As soon as Biscuits and me can put Joe away decent, we'll ride to you. Here's hopin' you keep on havin' luck like this. So long."

Beef swung to his saddle and rode away up the rocky trail to join Biscuits in another sad mission.

"My idea," said Rile, "is that we just ride on to the roundup, and keep all this to ourselves until we can get the J L Bar hands together, then break it to them all at once, so they won't get two or three stories about it. There may be some that won't want to go into a fight. If there is, we don't want them."

"There won't be," said Tyson. "They are as clean a bunch of cowhands as ever got together in Texas. Old Man Joe wouldn't have any other kind. Some of them may wonder why we made a stranger foreman. I'll just tell them that Beef and Biscuits did it, and that will satisfy them."

They headed up the gorge toward the roundup. Rile was thoughtful. If the ten men at the roundup stuck, he would have fourteen in all. Sixteen when Beef and Biscuits got back—if they were not murdered on the trail. The best that Tyson could tell him was that Perkins had forty men at the roundup. That was more than he needed, and it was plain that he had them for another purpose. Several small ranchers were with the roundup, and a few hands had come from a considerable distance to rep for their outfits. Whether any of these would take sides in a quarrel between the two biggest outfits in that part of the country was not known.

As they rode along, Rile asked Tyson questions from time to time. He was getting the lay of the range over which he must work thousands of J L Bar cattle, if he continued as foreman. Tyson told him that Deadrock Creek ran almost due south, in a narrow, deep gorge at the west side of the valley, which was five or six miles wide. Beyond the stream the land rose sharply, rough and broken, unfit for cow range. Cottonwood Canyon, fifteen miles north of the J L Bar, ran due west across the valley. Through the Canyon ran Cottonwood Creek. It flowed into Deadrock Creek, and above the mouth of Cottonwood. The Muleshoe ranch was fifteen miles north of Cottonwood Canyon, out on the uplands.

Rile had a fair picture of the country in his mind by the time they came in sight of the great cloud of dust that floated above the roundup herd, where thousands of hoofs were churning the ground, as cutters rode through the herd bringing out J L Bar cattle, and throwing them back on the range to the south. Rile had seen that sight many times, but this was different. Somewhere under that great cloud were three murderers that he meant to bring to swift justice. With them were many other killers, for it was said that the Muleshoe outfit was a tough gang, and the lives they had taken at Five Mile Draw indicated the statement was true. Rile had pledged himself to take that band of marauders to task, or never ride that valley alive.

Strangely, he did not realize that he was riding into that middle furnace of hell for a girl that he had met only the day before. He had told Tyson that he signed on in order to see the J L Bar get a square deal. Then, when Joe Lemon was murdered, Rile really believed that himself. When they began meeting the thin fringe of J L Bar cattle that were drifting south, the only thought in Rile's mind was to avenge the death of Joe Lemon.

Since daylight, men had been bringing in cattle from a wide section of country. Many hundreds of them were thrown into the great roundup herd. Now, well toward sunset, cutting the herd was almost finished. The J L Bar stuff was being thrown out, and all the others would be driven on to the next roundup grounds, near the Muleshoe. As they approached the herd, they saw men sitting their horses, singly or in groups, watching to see that nothing broke out of the herd except J L Bar stuff. Rile and his three companions stopped about a hundred yards from the edge of the herd, and a like distance from a group of several "cutters" who were resting their ponies, until they were called in again. Among them was Charlie Coates, a J L Bar puncher, who owned a famous "cutting horse" called Coley. Charlie recognized them, and rode to where they stood, the sun glinting on the glossy coat of Coley.

"Hi' gents," greeted Charlie, as he pulled up. "Where's Old Man Joe, and Beef and Biscuits?"

"They didn't come," evaded Tyson. "Where's our camp, and the remuda? We need some fresh mounts."

"The camps are all down in the Cottonwood Canyon, a mile north of here," replied Charlie. "The wrangler has had the remuda out on the uplands the other side of the canyon, but he'll be bringin' 'em in by this time, for everybody to rope fresh mounts for night work. How come old man Joe and them didn't—" Charlie stopped. A wild, high-headed, broad-horned steer had broken out of the herd, and was making a dash for freedom. There was a brown flash, and Rile was after that steer like a streak of light. He headed it, but the steer didn't want to turn back. It tried again and again to break through, but there was a solid wall of brown pony and lean rider ahead of it. Finally, it gave up and turned back, with Rile holding it in line for the herd. No one had offered to help. They all saw that help was not needed, and watched the performance as only real cowhands would.

"Dam'f that ain't the first time I ever seen a man ride on both sides of a cow-brute at once," declarel Charlie Coates. Who is that hombre, Tyson?"

Just then, Rile rode up to them, and Tyson, who was a bit of a diplomat, said: "Charlie, this is Riley Kemp. He is a new hand that just signed on with the J L Bar. And Rile, this is Charlie Coates, one of our boys. Charlie is the best rider on the best cutting horse in the known world."

"Not me," disclaimed Charlie, as he removed his gauntlet glove, to shake hands with Rile. "Not since I seen Rile and that little brown split theyself wide open, and ride on both side of that wild steer."

"Mighty glad to know you, Charlie," said Rile. "We won't fall out over who is the best cutter, or who has the best horse. Maybe we can try it out some time. I just happened to be riding Mink, because I haven't got a saddle string yet." Within two minutes, Rile had sold himself to Charlie Coates. Every cowboy living loves a good cutting horse, and the man who can stay on one when it is doing its stuff.

"Thanks, Rile," said Charlie. "I'll see you some more, but I got to get back in line now. They may want to send me in again."

As Charlie was about to turn away, Tyson called him: "Wait a minute, Charlie. Reck'n you could get our boys all together at camp, about sundown? I got some news for them. Don't make any fuss about it. Just tell 'em, quietly."

"Shore," said Charlie. "We just about cleaned the herd of J L Bar stuff. They aim to push the herd into Cottonwood and let 'em drink, then take 'em on out the other side to bed 'em."

"Let's go with Charlie, Grinny," said Chip. "Maybe they'll let us get into that herd on these old sunfishers, and show 'em how to cut cattle."

THE three rode away together, and stopped at the group of cutters who were still waiting orders. Rile was beginning to get his bearings now. "Who's boss of the roundup?" he asked.

"Perkins is boss this year. Him and Old Man Joe had an agreement that they were to take turn about running the big show. The roundup always begins on the other fellow's range and winds up with a big dance at the home of the boss. Last year, Old Man Joe was boss, and we pulled a whale of a dance at the J L Bar. The dance was supposed to be at the Muleshoe this year, but—Look! See that gent on the big bay thoroughbred. That's Bill Perkins."

Rile saw a giant of man, his red whiskers flowing in the wind, ride across from right to left between them and the herd, he and his horse casting a long shadow in the setting sun: "He needs killin' worse than any man in the known world. We ought to kill him right now, while we can."

"You are right about that," said Rile, "but it would start a fight, and our boys wouldn't know what to do, scattered all over the place like they are. Listen!"

Perkins had turned back, and stopped near the group of cutters: "Hey, you fellers," he roared. "We got all the J L Bar stuff out'n that herd, and we're goin' to turn 'em loose and let 'em drift to water. All you J L Bar hands line out and throw your cows farther back down the valley so they won't bust back into the herd. Get busy and keep 'em moving."

Perkins turned back, passed in front of Rile and Tyson again, rode on a little way and stopped, where he could watch, and see that his orders were being obeyed. Rile wondered how such a man could be a murderer. In spite of what Cotton Webb had told them, Rile meant to let Perkins make the first move. He wanted to be sure that he was right. Anyway, he was far from ready for a showdown. He signed Chip and Grinny to come back, and when they arrived, he said in a low tone: "I don't like to separate you boys, but it won't be for long. One of you ride each way along the line, as if you are helping to push the cattle back. Talk to every man you pass, and tell them when the cattle are out of the way, to meet on that little flat-topped mound about half a mile from here." Chip and Grinny rode away in opposite directions. Rile and Tyson were about to ride on to where the men were hazing the cattle away, when Tyson said:

"Look! See that fellow." A man was coming right through the fringe of J L Bar cattle, dodging cows as he came on at breakneck speed. His horse was foaming with sweat, and reeling as it ran. He rode straight to where Bill Perkins stood. Rile couldn't hear what the man was saying, but he was gesticulating wildly. Suddenly, Perkins whirled his horse and dashed away toward the herd, which was now moving swiftly toward the water. The rider followed him slowly, on his spent horse. "That was the news," said Tyson, grimly. "Things will happen now. That buzzard has been prowling the J L Bar range and has found Cotton and the two others. We better get to that mound."

The J L Bar men gathered swiftly. Almost by the time Rile and Tyson reached the little hill, they were there, and within a few moments they sat their horses in a circle, heads to the center. When all were present, Tennessee held up his hand: "Fellers," he said, "I want to speak a little piece. First off, I want to tell you that this gent is Riley Kemp. He drifts into the J. L. Bar yesterday evening looking for work. He got there about the time we got in with the bodies, and he signed on *after* he knew of the mess the J L Bar was in. I want to tell you that you can tie to him."

"Anything you say goes with us," came a chorus of voices, and then one said: "Where's Old Man Joe and Beef and Biscuits?"

"I'm coming to that," said Tyson. "We all starts back to the roundup a while before noon. Old Man Joe was in the lead, like always, with Beef and Biscuits right behind him. Chip and Grinny was pretty close up, but Rile and I were riding drag about a hundred yards behind the rest. You all know that big thicket of weesatch on the south bank of Five Mile, where the trail goes down. Well, just after Old Man Joe and Beef and Biscuits swings around that thicket out of our sight, to start down the trail, guns begin to roar. Rile and me jumps our braunks around the thicket to see what the hell was going on. Old Man Joe was on the ground, dead, with Beef and Biscuits bending over him. He was dead. Shot plumb apart."

"Hell!" yelled one old puncher. "You

fellers didn't let the dirty buzzards get away, did you."

"No, we didn't let 'em get away. Rile was the first one to find his head, because he keeps it with him all the time. He tells Beef and Biscuits to take care of Old Man Joe, then yells: 'Come on, fellers.' He sends that little brown of his'n half way down that rocky trail at the first jump, and keeps right on going. You know the place. Two hundred yards of level ground on the north side of the creek. About ten seconds after Rile crossed that creek, he was in the middle of the damndest gunfight I ever saw. Chip and Grinny and I got there in time to help him finish it."

Tennessee was selling Rile to that bunch of cowhands. He was a good salesman, and he got the job done. Then he told the rest of it, winding up with Old Beef's election of Rile as foreman of the J L Bar. There was not a dissenting voice.

"There's not much time for talk," said Rile, "and I'm not much of a talker. All I'll say now is that I mean to square these murders. I won't send you into a fight. If one comes, I'll lead you in."

"I reck'n one's comin'," grinned Chip. "Look yonder."

FULLY thirty men came storming up the slope, Perkins leading them. "Line out, boys," said Rile, calmly. "Get far enough apart to work your guns if you have to. Keep your hands away from your hardware until I drag mine, then give 'em all you got. It's about two to one but we'll give 'em what we can if it comes to a showdown."

Fifty yards from that line of silent horsemen, Perkins and his men pulled up. Perkins rode forward alone, his hand in the air. He stopped a little way from them, and roared: "What the hell are you punchers doing gathered here, like a flock of buzzards around a carcass? Don't you know they's a roundup goin on and work to be done? Where's Lemon?"

"He's at home," Rile said, quietly.

"Oh, he is?" sneered Perkins. "Too old to stand hard work, I reck'n. Who's roddin' the outfit while he's away?"

"I am," Rile told him.

"So," yelled Perkins. "I reck'n you are a fancy gunner and fast kill that Lemon has brought in to help finish the job that him and his boys started yesterday, or he wouldn't made you foreman, and you a stranger. I know you and Tyson and Chip and Grinny rides in here in a bunch a while ago. One of my hands comes in just now, and tells me that you fellers bushed and murdered three of my men in Five Mile Draw. What about that?"

"He lied," said Rile, calmly. "We killed three of your hands in Five Mile Draw because they bushed Joe Lemon."

"Hell, no!" roared Perkins. "That's plumb different. If you boys ketched them buzzards drygulchin' Joe, you done plumb right to kill 'em. That little mess yesterday can be forgot and the Muleshoe and the J L Bar can go on like always. I'll help you any way I can with the J L Bar stock, and if you need a few more hands, I'll let you have some of mine. I always meant to be a good neighbor to the J L Bar, and I still do."

Perkins was talking soft and friendly, now. Lemon and his two boys were dead, and he would have things his own way in Deadrock Valley. He failed to see what was in Kemp's eyes.

"I don't think we can get along very well," Rile said, quietly. "I didn't tell you that we caught Cotton Webb whole, and hung him. Before he stretched rope, he talked some. He said you hired him and the other thugs to murder Lemon, and I believe him. If you think the J L Bar is going to pass that you'd better think some more."

For a moment there was a blank stare on the face of Bill Perkins. Then he whirled his horse and jumped it back to his men. He knew what came next all right. As he turned facing the J L Bar men, Perkins was tugging at his gun, and calling to his men to go in and take that bunch of buzzards.

Rile didn't wait for them to attack. He shot forward, with Tennessee on one side of him, and Chip and Grinny on the other. His whole line moved forward but those four made the flying wedge. With guns flaming they drove right through the Muleshoe line and split their forces wide open. Within seconds two battles were going on there on the open prairie in the setting sun. Each J L Bar rider picked out a man and went in for the kill. The battlefield was two hundred yards across in half a minute. How Old Bill Perkins ever got out of that mess alive was a mystery. But escape he did, and with half of his men he tore on down the slope toward the crossing on Cottonwood.

"Come on, Rile," yelled Chip. "Let's ketch the buzzard and hang him while his tongue's still out."

"No," said Rile. "We have lost too many men already. We don't want to ride into a trap."

Fourteen members of the Muleshoe outfit lay scattered about the prairie. Rile had lost six men. A little better than two to one, but Rile didn't have them to lose. A little way from where they stood a red-haired man lay on his back, his crossed eyes staring at the sky: "That's Dode Perkins. He's the one that kilt Ashur Radcliff yesterday. I seen Tennessee ride to Dode and shoot him apart, but—" There was a catch in Chip's voice. "There's Tennessee a little ways from him."

Silently, Rile dismounted, straightened Tyson's body on the ground, and put his hat over his face. As he straightened up he saw Charlie Coates rise from doing the same thing for a boyish figure on the ground. Charlie was swearing, and his voice shook as he said: "Damn Perkins to the middle of hell. I aim to kill him when I see him again."

"I know, Charlie," Rile said, gently. "Tennessee was my partner, too, but this is war."

Rile gathered his men around him. "Listen, boys. This is orders. There is only eight of us left. We can't take the Muleshoe in an open fight. They've got too many men. Far as the cattle are concerned, this roundup is over. Far as Perkins and his other killer son are concerned, it never will be over until either they or I are dead. I'm going to camp. I want to get the wagon and the remuda out of that canyon and send them on home. I'll send the wagon by here to take Tennessee and the others on to the J L Bar. You fellows get our boys together, and have them ready to load when the wagon comes."

"Aw hell, Rile," protested Chip. "You ain't goin' to ride into that bottom alone with all them he taggurs loose in there."

"One man is enough to lose," said Rile. "Let me go with you," begged Coates. "It won't be safe to ride into that canyon on the main trail. I know another way that we can get down. Anyway, them buzzards got my partner, and I got a right to get a few more of 'em."

"All right, Charlie. When you fellers get to the J L Bar tell Beef and Biscuits the news. Then tell 'em that Charlie and I have gone to finish the roundup, and we won't be home until the job is done. Let's ride, Charlie."

The sun had set when Charlie led the way down a steep and dangerous trail, on his sure-footed cutting horse, and the dainty hoofs of Mink clicked on the stones a little way behind him. The canyon was two hundred yards wide at the spot where they came down into it, half a mile above the cowcamps, and there was considerable timber in it. Every step of the way from there on was into a potential death trap if Perkins had thought to picket the trail. It was growing quite dark in the deep gorge when Charlie moved cautiously on in the lead, because he knew the trail.

III

THE cook had supper ready when Charlie and Rile reached camp. He stood over the fire, talking to another man, who said: "Hello, Charlie."

"Howdy, Dave," greeted Charlie. "Meet Rile Kemp, a new hand with the J L Bar outfit. Dave Enright, a neighboring ranchman, Rile." They shook hands, and Enright said:

"Where's everybody, Charlie?"

"Rile is foreman of our outfit now," Charlie told him. "Maybe he better tell you."

"Shore," said Dave. "Bein' foreman, I reck'n you can tell me what I want to know. I heard that bombardment a while ago. Then Perkins and some of his men comes storming into camp. I couldn't get no talk out of 'em, so I comes up here. What's this mess about, anyway?"

"I'm a stranger in here, Enright," said Rile, "but I take it that you are a visiting ranchman at this roundup. There won't be any more of it. We are going to send our wagon and remuda back to the J L Bar. The Muleshoe outfit killed George and Monty Lemon yesterday. I suppose you know about that."

"Yes, I knowed that, but them things is always apt to happen. I didn't think that would stop the roundup."

"Maybe it wouldn't," Rile told him, "but Perkins sent his killers to get Joe Lemon. They bushed him cold at Five Mile Draw. So, there's a war to stop wars between the J L Bar and the Muleshoe. Dode Perkins was killed in that fight a while ago. Old Man Bill run out of it but he still has one son, Ranse Perkins. This war won't stop until they're both dead."

"That shore is hell, declared Dave Enright. "Joe was the best man in Texas and them two boys of his'n was all right men, too. I never thought Perkins was bad. He blusters some and is sorty overbearing, but I always got along with him. His boys was wild and rough, but they never got into much trouble before."

"That's the way it lies," said Rile. "Deadrock Valley won't be any place for innocent bystanders now. We're not yelling for help. If you and any others want to take sides with Perkins, that's your business. If you don't want to do that, I'd advise you to pack your kits and drag it out of here before morning."

"That's just what we'll do," said Enright. "I'll borry anything from meal to money but I'll be damned if I borry a hand in this game. I can handle every little rancher in the outfit, and we'll all be gone from here by the time the birds whistles for daylight. Thanks for the warning."

"Fine," said Rile. "That way, when we see a man after daylight, we can kill him, and not go wrong. Join us in a little grub, Enright. Give us some coffee, cookee."

When he finished eating, Rile turned to Dave Enright: "Glad to have met you, Mr. Enright, and hope we meet some more. I'll be right busy for a while, and I reck'n you want to get the visitors moving. Goodbye." He shook hands with Enright and turned to the cook: "Pack what you can of this stuff in the grub box and throw the rest away. Then load your kit and get ready to roll. The night-hawk will bring your mules. When you are ready, hit the trail for the J L Bar. You'll find the boys waiting for you out on the prairie a ways."

Rile and Charlie walked off toward the remuda, a hundred yards to the north of camp: "You shore talked right plain and open to Enright," said Charlie, as they went along. "He might talk a whole lot before he leaves."

"I want him to talk," Rile said. "Perkins may be fool enough to think that now Joe Lemon is dead, no one will carry the fight on. I want him to know that we are on his trail. I aim to run him and Ranse down, and kill them in a fair fight."

"That'll be some chore," grunted Charlie. "Ranse is a cold killer, the fastest and most accurate gunner in this valley."

Rile made no reply to that. He told the night-hawk to take the cook's mules to camp, and help him hitch up. Then he told the wrangler that when the wagon started he was to turn the remuda loose, and let the horses follow the wagon. They went back to the camp and Rile asked if there were any cartridges in the wagon.

"Plenty," said Charlie, "and there is something else in there. My pardner and me each had a carbine. We didn't want to pack 'em, while we worked cattle so we put 'em in the wagon. They'd be right handy if our *pistolas* were empty, or we had some long-range work to do. I'll get 'em out."

When Rile and Charlie left the camp, they were still leading their mounts. A hundred yards down the bottom, toward the other camps, they tied the horses in a thicket: "I want to get where we can cover the trail at the creek crossing with these carbines," Rile said. "If anybody tries to stop the wagon, there'll be trouble."

Charlie led the way on to within fifty yards of the crossing. They stopped, and stood listening, as they leaned against a big cottonwood in the deep shadows. They could hear men talking at the other camps just below the road. Presently, they heard the J L Bar chuck-wagon start to roll. The bell on the coupling pole began to jingle, and a rumbling of hoofs followed. The wrangler had turned the remuda loose, and the horses were following that bell as they had done all their lives. The wagon passed on and climbed the rocky hill. They could see sparks flash from the shod hoofs, as the loose horses followed on out of sight with the wrangler and night-hawk just behind them. Not a shot was fired. No one challenged them.

"Come on," whispered Rile. "I want a closer look at that Muleshoe camp." They stole silently through the trees, crossed the wagon road, and stopped in a dense thicket within a hundred feet of the Perkins camp. Towering Bill Perkins stood in the light of the campfire talking to his men. Ranse stood near him. "Get everything out'n the waggin," ordered Perkins. "We got fourteen dead ones to haul home and bury. That'll be a load. The J L Bar waggin is gone. We'll wait until they get out of the way, then we'll—"

"Wait, hell," snarled Ranse. "Why not stompede the remuda out on the prairie and kill the cook, wrangler and night-hawk. We got to kill all of 'em, anyway, according to what Dave Enright said."

"We already got a load," said Perkins. "That new J L foreman is a gunner, and Coates ain't slow. They are in this draw some place, because they didn't foller the waggin out, and I don't aim for 'em to get out. I got men watching the road where it goes up the hill on both sides of the canyon and them's the only places in five miles that anybody can get out of here. I aim to take them two hombres. I got the tree picked out to hang 'em on."

"If I had of been with you fellers, instead of Dode, they would of been a different story to tell about that fight," said Ranse.

"Might," said Bill, "but don't worry. You'll have a chance to show what you can do with a gun. The only way we can get out of this mess is to shoot ourselves loose from it. We got to kill everything on the J L Bar range that can talk, then lie like hell about what happened, if anybody ever questions us. Halfway moves won't do now. One of you boys lope out to the herd. Tell the boys to turn the cows wild loose, and come on to camp. We got to get going."

"Look, Rile," whispered Charlie. "We can take them two buzzards easy from here. Let's do it while we can."

"No," replied Rile. "I never have bushed a man and I don't aim to start now. Besides that, we have something else to do, and quick. We've got to get back and warn the other boys."

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At their horses, Rile said: "I guess Perkins thinks a horse can come down that slide, but no horse can climb it. Here's where we show him what Coley and Mink can do. You know the trail. Lead out."

THEY had almost reached the spot where the wild slide came down at the south side of the canyon, when guns crashed, and long plumes of flame darted out from a clump of trees on the creek bank to the right. Rile jumped his horse square at where those flames started, firing ahead of him as he went. Charlie joined him in shelling the shadows. Two horses broke out of the tree clump and sped down the creek. There was a moment's silence, then Charlie said: "Listen! One of them horses is wild loose. A braunk with a man on it wouldn't make a noise like that."

As Charlie stopped talking they heard a man cough among the trees not more than fifty feet from them. "Huh," grunted Charlie. "I guess we got him good. Let's take a look."

They dismounted and went to where they could hear the man wheezing. Charlie scratched a match. The man lay on the ground. He was little more than a boy, with a smooth, dimpled face. He looked up and gasped: "Hello, Charlie. You—you fellers got me good but I want to tell you something before I go. I didn't want to ride into this. It was orders. The boss told me to do it, I had to go. Soon as Enright told the Old Man about you two being in here, he throws guards at the road on both sides. He didn't think ary horse on earth could climb that slide, but he wasn't taking chances. So, he sends four of us to watch the head of it. Then Dink Bomer and me rides down in here, to see can we flush you. Dink runs out on me, the dirty buzzard. He'll pack the news to camp that you are in there and they'll gang on you. I'm talkin' fast, because I'm leaking pretty bad, and won't—" The dying man coughed again.

"Can't we do something for you, Dimples?" asked Charlie.

"Not—not a thing. I want to tell you something more, while I can. If you ride that slide, you won't have a chance. Two men are at the top to bush you as you come over."

"How many men has Perkins got?" asked Rile.

"You fellers riddled a flock of them," said Dimp Graves, "but there's still thirty in camp, and— Bill sent a man riding hell-for-leather to the Muleshoe to get more. You—you boys haven't got any more chance than I have, and that ain't none, but—that—that's all for me." Dimp quivered and lay still. They straightened his lifeless body on the ground and put his hat over his face.

"What is it like on up this canyon?" asked Rile.

"A little way above here it begins to narrow, and becomes a crack in the ground, with a creek flowing through it. Nothing that ain't got wings could get out of it."

"Any water at the head of it?"

"Shore. That's where the big spring is," replied Charlie.

"All right. Lead out. We are going up there."

"But we'll be in a trap," Charlie protested.

"We are in one now," Rile told him, grimly. "We can hold a narrow gorge, with a bluff at our backs, better than we can here. Let's go."

Charlie led on up the canyon to the narrows. From there on the gorge was about fifty feet wide, with towering perpendicular walls. The dainty hoofs of the two cutting horses clicked on the solid stone, and were echoed by the bluffs. Crossing and recrossing the stream, as it swept from side to side of the gorge, they came at last to its head. "Here we are," said Charlie, as he pulled up at a great ridge of boulders that lay in a jumbled heap across the gorge. "The spring is on the other side of them rocks but we can't get our horses over it."

They dismounted and scrambled over the rocks. It was pretty dark in the gorge, but they could see that the canyon widened slightly at its head. Suddenly, Rile said: "It is either getting lighter, or my eyes are getting used to this place. I can see everything now."

"Shore it's getting lighter," said Charlie. "The moon is almost full. Look. You can see the edge of it now, just over them tall Weesatch bushes up on the top of the bluff." A few moments later the moon was throwing a flood of light into the deep gorge. Rile remembered then that the moon had been shining when he talked to Ella Lemon, and promised to rep for her, but that seemed ages ago. Presently, he turned away without a word, and climbed back over the rocks. A minute later, Charlie heard the clicking of shod hoofs on the rocks. Rile was coming back, and Mink was following him, stepping from stone to stone with the intelligence of a human being. Inside the barrier, Rile unsaddled the pony and turned it loose, to graze on the scant grass and weeds around the pool. Without a word, Charlie went over the rocks, and Rile heard him say: "Come on, black hawss. You can do anything that brown can do. Let's go."

IN spite of Charlie's disclaimer, a friendly rivalry was growing up between the two men and their horses. Rile and Charlie sat down on a big, flat rock, well up toward the top of the barrier, and smoked in silence for some time. Charlie broke the silence with: "Too bad we didn't drill Old Man Bill Perkins and Ranse, when we had a chance."

"I don't think so," said Rile. "That kind of stuff never pays."

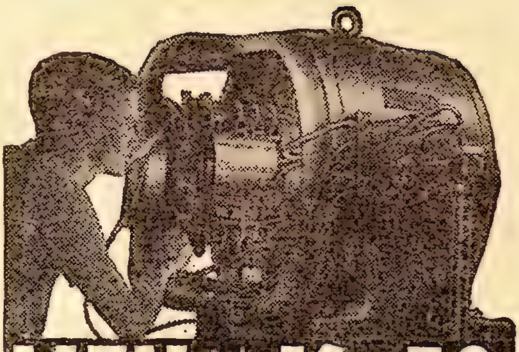
"Maybe it's all right with you," Charlie told him, "but a man has to think about others sometimes. I pulled a raw one when I rode in here with you, instead of going on home with the other boys."

"I didn't order you to come," Rile reminded him.

"Oh, I know that. I ain't complaining, and I ain't blaming you. I just been thinking some, and wondering if a feller ought to always do what he wants to, right at the moment. Just in case I happen to get out of this alive, and you don't, you want to send a message to anybody?"

"No." Rile spoke the one word, and they lapsed into silence again. After a long time, Charlie spoke again: "Rile, I can't understand what would make a stranger sign on with an outfit when he knew it was in a war, and then when Old Man Joe was kilt, take the whole mess over and set in to carry it to finish."

"Such things are hard to understand," Rile told him. "Just say I liked the way Old Man Joe took his rough stuff and wanted to help. We'll let it go at that."



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"All right. Now about me. Any other time I wouldn't mention this, but you might get out alive, and me not. If you do, I want you to take a message to Ella Lemon for me. Tell her that the reason I didn't come to her when I found out her daddy was dead was because I wanted to get the men that killed him and the others."

"Engaged to her?" Rile asked, bluntly.

"Not exactly. We've been friendly a long time but I never told her I loved her, and wanted her to marry me. Reason I didn't was that I was waiting to get a little stake. Up to the time I saw her, I never saved anything. Just spent my money hellin' around poker games, dancehalls and the like. I'm sure that Ella knows how I feel and I hope she feels the same way. Will you take the message for me?"

"Yes," said Rile. "If I get out and you don't I'll tell her what you said. Now you got that off your mind, you'd better stretch out on the soft ground down there and go to sleep. You're apt to need your eyes wide open when morning comes."

Charlie was snoring in a few minutes. As Rile sat alone in the moonlight, it flashed to his mind just why he was there. He was doing it for Ella and for nothing else. Now he had learned that another man had a prior claim on her. Well, when it was over, the trails would still be open and he could ride on out of her life. He meant to be fair to Charlie.

Rile put all that out of his mind by sheer force of will power. There were greater problems at hand. There must be some way out of here, he thought. He looked up at the top of the high bluff. Some time or other, perhaps when that great heap of stone was thrown from the top of the bluff to make the barrier, the top layer of stone, two or three feet thick, had been broken along the north side of the gorge, above the pool. Much of it had fallen in, but great boulders still lay along the ledge that it had left. There were jagged rocks protruding from the canyon walls. No rope could be thrown to the top of that bluff, but he might throw a loop to a projecting stone, pull himself up to that shelf, then throw again to one of the great stones on that top ledge. But, if they got out that way, they would be on foot, fifteen miles from the J L Bar. Anyway, that would be abandoning Mink, the only friend he had on earth. He put the thought from him.

Rile walked softly to his saddle, then turned and passed over the barrier with the tread of a cat, a lariat in his hand. Sixty feet below the barrier, he tied one end close to the ground around a little tree that grew against the bluff, then carried the other end of the rope across to the other side of the gorge, where he made it fast. Feeling his way back along the rope, he found that it was about six inches from the ground. Just right to trip a man. Rile stole back over the barrier, and sat down in the shadows, a carbine across his lap.

He was keenly on the alert to every sound. He was trying to put himself in the enemy's position, and reason out what he would do. He had heard Perkins say that he was going to drive the valley, and kill everything that could talk. That would mean the murder of Ella and her mother, along with the few men remaining at the ranch. The thought set Rile writhing with rage.

Bill Perkins had abandoned his trip to the ranch for the moment, though Rile didn't know that. The fact of the matter was that Perkins had decided to get first the two men who were trapped in that gorge since they knew more about his schemes than anyone else. Cotton Webb had spilled the beans. There would still be time to take the J L Bar, and maybe escape with the stolen goods, but not with Rile and Charlie at large. The cow country might pass a thing like the open fights they had when they killed George and Monty, but they would never forgive the murder of Joe Lemon, if Rile and Charlie lived to tell their story. So Perkins moved his picket line farther up the gorge. He got word from the two men at the top of the slide that Rile and Charlie had not tried to pass out that way. Dink Bomer had told him that they were still in the gorge, and when they found the body of Dimp Graves, Perkins knew it was true. Come morning, they would take the two men.

Rile sat on through the night, watching and listening. The moon completed its arc and went out of sight. Black darkness fell into the gorge.

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IV

SUDDENLY, Rile tensed his nerves, and strained his ears. Somewhere down the gorge he heard the clink of an overturned rock, then nothing more until the silence was shattered by a crashing fall, and a muttered oath. Rile's carbine spat twice at a blurred figure on the ground below the barricade, then sprayed the gorge from side to side. He stopped firing, and as the echoes died out he heard the footsteps of a man, running swiftly back down the gorge. Charlie sprang up and ran to where Rile sat: "Whu-what happened?"

"Somebody tried to slip up on us, and—didn't," Rile said, grimly. "You better wash your face, and get your eyes open. Things are apt to happen pretty soon."

Something did happen, at once. Charlie was bending over washing his face. Rile heard a noise at the top of the bluff and glanced up. Two men could be seen against the graying sky of morning. They had levers and were straining at an immense rock that teetered on the edge of the ledge. The rock went off balance and plunged downward. The men jumped back. But only one of them made it. Rile's carbine cracked, and the other one fell half way down the face of the bluff, onto a jutting stone. The great rock fell on the east side of the pool, embedding itself in the soft earth. Fortunately, the two ponies were on the opposite side of the pool.

"I've been thinking, Charlie," said Rile. "Bill Perkins can't afford to let us get away. He's got to kill us. Those fellows tried it and failed. As soon as it gets light, the whole outfit will ride in here and take us."

"It's getting light now," said Charlie, "and— Listen!"

They could hear the hard drumming of hoofs on the rocky floor of the gorge. The battle would soon be on. Two against perhaps forty. Rile yelled: "Get set. Here they come, too many of them. Drop the first one that comes in range, and keep right on dropping them. If our guns jam, we're gone." As Rile finished speaking, his carbine barked, and Charlie's followed. Men and horses dropped all over the place. Perkins was yelling like a madman, urging his men forward. When the carbines were empty, Rile and Charlie hit their forty-fives. The gorge was literally filling up with dead and wounded men and horses. The Muleshoe riders couldn't take it. They broke and fled back down the gorge. They had gone almost out of hearing, when the thunder of gunfire began to roar far down the canyon.

"Now, what does that mean?" said Charlie.

"I don't know," smiled Rile, "but I have an idea that Chip and Grinny could tell you. Old Beef and Biscuits might know, too."

"You— Look at yo' shirt sleeve, Rile. It's all bloody."

"Yep," said Rile. "I got a couple bites but I feel mighty lucky that I didn't get a couple of hundred. They shot that ridge of rocks up like a firecracker. Both of the bites are in my left arm. Just look what we did to the Muleshoe gang."

Charlie looked over the barrier and yelled: "Good God! We got Bill Perkins. He must of been leading the deal."

"He won't lead another one," said Rile, grimly, as he removed his shirt and tore off the right sleeve.

Charlie took the clean right sleeve and bandaged the two wounds. Suddenly, he yelled: "Look out, Rile! They're coming back."

They looked over the rocks and saw four riders pull up. "Hey," yelled Chip. "What the hell are you two doin' holed up in here like a pair of badgers? Don't you know you can't use that much fresh meat before it spoils? Rile, you look plumb vulgar, in that one-legged shirt. And look at that gent, hanging up there on that rock. He'll have one hell of a time gettin' down from there when Gabriel blows that old whistle of his'n."

"Go ahead, Chip," laughed Rile. "Get it out of your system. You can't make me mad. I never was as glad to see anybody in my whole life as I am to see you fellows. Did you see Ranse Perkins down the creek?"

"We shore didn't," said Chip. "If we had, this old Deadrock Valley roundup would be over. I see Old Man Bill's carcass among the dead out here. Looks like Ranse, the old varmint, is afeared of

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the wrath to come and gets clean away."

"He won't," grated Rile. "I heard him say what he would do to me if he met me. Here's where he gets a chance to do it."

Within a few minutes the six of them were riding back down the gorge. At the trail that came down from the south, Rile stopped them: "Chip, did you fellows come down that trail?"

"Shore did," grinned Chip. "It was sorty rough. We had to kill a coupla gents before we could get down."

"Let me see you a minute, Charlie," said Rile. They rode a little way apart, and Rile went on: "I'm still foreman. Are you taking orders from me?"

"Why, shore am, Rile. What makes you think—"

"Then take that trail and see how quick Coley can get you to the J L Bar. If Ella is ever going to need you, it's now."

Charlie stammered a word of thanks, and shot away up the rocky trail. When Rile returned to the others, Old Beef growled: "Got more hands than you need, Rile?"

"Got enough for the job to be done," replied Rile, calmly. "I had another job for Charlie."

They rode on to the Muleshoe camp. Bedrolls, slickers, and a scattered camp kit lay all over the place, but not a man was to be seen: "I don't know how far we'll have to chase 'em," said Rile, "but I'm going to take Ranse Perkins if I have to do it in his own yard. Let's go."

They climbed out of the canyon on the north side and had ridden a mile on the uplands when they saw a dozen riders come up out of a draw, all heading toward the Muleshoe.

"There they are," called Rile. "Come on. Here's where we wind up this range war."

RANSE PERKINS stopped his men when he saw that he had only five to fight. Rile led right on to within fifty feet of him. Ranse went for his gun, and Rile called to him: "Hold it, Ranse. Let's you and me have a gabfest."

"All right," snarled Ranse, "but make it short. What you say won't make any difference in what's goin' to happen."

"Here it is," Rile told him, calmly. "We have killed more of your men than we wanted to kill. There is no use in any more being killed on either side—except you or me. I propose that we shoot it out, and let the best man win. I have four men with me, who can whip your whole gang. They won't break into the game unless your men do, and if your boys start it they'll all be killed. If that suits you, let's go."

The Muleshoe men were slightly behind Ranse. He glanced behind him, and saw that they were turning their mounts and heading for home. Left to play out the last act of the great tragedy alone, Ranse snarled: Why, damn yo' impudent soul, of course it suits me." Ranse was cursing his men under his breath for leaving him alone in the fight, but he knew it would do no good to try to run out of it, so he went for his gun and the duel was on.

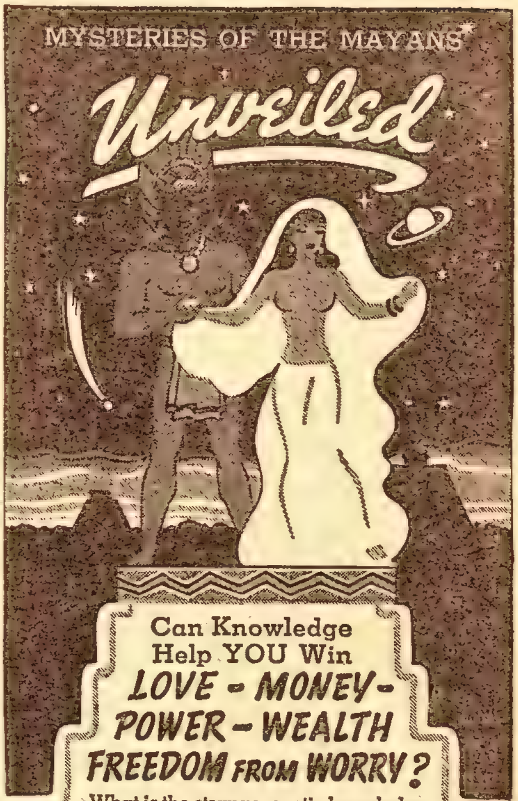
Ranse rode a magnificent horse, but it could not dodge and turn like Mink could. From the start, it was plain that the little cutting horse was going to make the difference between two master gunners of equal skill. Round after round they fought. Three times they emptied their guns and reloaded. Both were taking lead, but Ranse was getting more of it. Finally, the larger horse, hit several times, began to lag from the continuous whirling. Then Mink shot straight at the target, and Rile drove Ranse from his saddle with the last bullet in his gun. Old Joe Lemon was murdered, but he had been avenged.

"HOW far is it to Jimtown, in west of here?" Rile asked, when he got his breath.

"Ten mile," grunted Beef. "What of it?"

"Just this: Beef, you and Biscuits hightail it for the J L Bar. They need you bad. I'm leaking pretty bad, and the sooner I can get to a doctor, the better. Chip, you and Grinny try to keep up with Mink, and I'll make it before I leak plum dry. Let's go."

Beef cursed softly but he and Biscuits headed for home. Chip and Grinny had to use their spurs to keep up with Mink, but they made it. Rile didn't leak plumb dry, but he was pretty pale and weak when they helped him in Old Doc Pingle's office. The doctor had a little hospital back of his office, so he went to work. When he finished, got Rile on a bed and gave him a shot that would quiet him for a while, he said



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as he washed his hands: "That's the first time I ever saw a man with fifteen bullet holes in him, and none of 'em hit a bone, or go to the hollow." The darting and dancing of Mink had doubtless been responsible for that. Ranse never could make a center shot at that moving target.

"Reck'n we better hit the trail for the J L Bar?" asked Grinny.

"Hell, no!" snapped Chip. "Rile didn't give us no orders to ride. I aim to stick around town until I see how he gets along. While we are waiting we can take some drinks and shoot a crap or two—just to keep our hands in, in case he wants us to shoot the doctor, or somebody. He's the best damn man that ever forked a braunk, except Old Man Joe—and he's dead."

No one ever knew how many drinks the wild rascals took, nor how many craps they shot, but they were waiting at the door, clear-eyed and rearing to go when the doctor arrived at his office next morning: "How's he makin' it, Doc?" asked Chip. "How's he doin'?"

"How is who doing?" asked the doctor.

"Who?" snorted Chip. "Why, Rile Kemp, of course. He's the most important one you got in that cripple-pen of yo'n. If he's well enough, we want to cut him out and drive him to the home range."

"I don't think he is well enough for that," smiled the doctor, "but he is doing very well."

"Can we see him?" Chip asked, eagerly.

"I don't see why not. When I left him, he had just ruined a big tray of breakfast, and was smoking a cigarette." The doctor took them to the door of Rile's room. He knew cowboys, and he knew that under that rough, careless talk of Chip's, which was just camouflage, there was feeling deeper than most men ever know.

"Hi, Boss," greeted Chip. "Want us to rope yo' mount this morning?"

"No," said Rile. "I don't think I could make a full hand today. Here's some orders for you two. First thing, I want you to put Mink in the best livery stable in town. Tell the stableman that I'll pay him when I get out of here, which won't be long. Then I want you boys to high-tail it for the J L Bar. When you get there, tell Old Beef this: He knows more about the valley, the J L Bar, and its stock, than

I ever could learn. I did my job the best I could, and now he'll have to take over and run things. Soon as I can ride, I aim to head west. The outfit doesn't owe me anything for the two days' work I did. By the way, there's a carbine on my saddle. When I ride out of here I don't want to look like I'm going to war. Take that gun and turn it over to Charlie Coates. Tell Charlie I said good luck to him. That's all. You better ride now. It's a long drag to the J L Bar."

"Aw, hell, Rile," protested Chip. "We can't leave you bogged plumb down, with yo' head under you, and nobody to tail you up."

"I'm foreman until Beef takes over, snapped Rile, "and I say ride from here."

They gripped his hand in silence, then trundled their spurs out of the building. Rile turned over with his face to the wall. He had learned in two days to love these two wild, harumscarum rascals. They were both older than he, but still acted like boys. He would like to be with them a long time, but he could never be foreman of the J L Bar, since Charlie Coates had won the only prize the valley held for him. Running the J L Bar would be Charlie's job, now. Ella had only asked him to "rep" for her in the roundup. That was over now. He had done the best he could, and now he was free to ride. He wouldn't wait until his wounds healed. He could stop at the next town, and rest a while. He wanted only to get away now. There was plenty of room farther west for a man to forget.

Rile was not a quitter. His job now was to get well. To build back the blood he had lost, and gain strength enough to sit his horse. He put everything he had into the job. He had passed the third day. His wounds were healing, and there had been no fever. He was lying on his back, just after a hearty noon meal, and comfortably drowsy, when he heard the jingle of spurs out in the corridor. The door opened, and Chip, grinning like an ape, yelled: "Hello, Boss. How's yo' liver workin'?" Just behind Chip was Grinny, his big mouth spread across his tanned face in that perpetual grin that had given him his nickname. Both of them had their boots shined to the tops, as if they were going to a party,

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and their eyes were dancing about something.

"Where did you two hay-eaters come from?" smiled Rile. "I thought I told you to hit the trail for the J L Bar, and I haven't been out of my head."

"We went back to the J L Bar, like you said," Chip told him. "We tells Old Beef what you said, and he—" Chip stuck.

"Yes. What did Beef say?"

"He was pretty certain about his orders. He told us to get the hell back to Jimtown. To take care of you until you was able to keep up with the drag, then drive you home to the J L Bar."

"Oh, he did," grinned Rile. "What else did he say?"

"Well," drawled Chip, "Beef was sorty on the prod about you, and he might not meant for me to tell you this, but— He cussed right smart, and said if you didn't want to come back and be foreman of the J L Bar, you was just a plain fool. Looks like Beef has gone plumb loco, but you made him foreman, and we had to take orders from him. If we don't handle you, he'll fire us. First thing we got to do is scrape around that sage on yo' ornery face, burn it off, and give the grass a chance to grow."

Chip yelled for a razor, got it, and shaved off the week's growth of sandy whiskers. When he had finished, he looked at Rile and grinned. "It's a dang pity you didn't leak plumb dry before you got to Jimtown that day. You'd make a plumb handsome corpse stretch out now, and rest. About tomorrow we're goin' to tail you up and drive you home. If we can't do it, we can get plenty of help by yelling for it. We got to go to the resterawnt now, and feed our faces, but we'll be back."

When they were gone Rile lay on his back, staring at the ceiling, his eyes shiny. Something about those two crazy cowboys set his heart beating as it should. He did have some friends, after all. The latch clicked and the door opened softly. Ella Lemon stood in the room, and at the expression in her dark eyes, Rile's heart almost stopped. Clad in a dress of soft, white material, embarrassment coloring her cheeks, she looked like an exceedingly healthy angel to Rile. He stammered awkwardly and made a very faint effort to say something.

"Let me talk, Rile," she said, gently. "You are too weak, and besides that I have something to tell you. I don't know much about how a girl ought to act. My life has been spent with men who came right out in the open with everything. I guess if a girl tells the truth, she won't go far wrong. When I asked you to rep for me I knew you were the only man on earth for me, and I thought you felt the same way. Was I right?"

"Yes," said Rile. "I knew it then, and I have known it every moment since then, but— I had to give Charlie a square deal after he told me that—"

"I know. Charlie told me all about it. He's a good sport. We were good friends, but he was just mistaken about the way I felt toward him. He told me about you, too, and said God forgot to make any more men like you. When I left home he told me goodbye, and said he wouldn't be there when we got back. That he was drifting on farther west."

What happened then concerned nobody but Rile and Ella. A few minutes later they heard spurs jingling, and someone knocked at the door. Ella straightened her hair, and Rile called: "Come in."

"Hello, Boss," chuckled Chip. "Looks like you are some better."

Rile was sitting up in bed, and his voice was as strong as ever when he said: "Yes, I'm better, and I'm still foreman of the J L Bar. Here's some orders for you two hay-eaters. Get out of here, and rustle a marriage license for Ella and me. Then round a preacher and drive him in here. Pronto."

"Yippay!" yelled Chip, as they passed out into the street. "That's the way to finish a roundup. Better than the biggest dance in the known world, and a whole barrel of whiskey. Come on, Grinny. I'll get the marriage license, while you round up and hog-tie a preacher. I wouldn't know one if I seen him."

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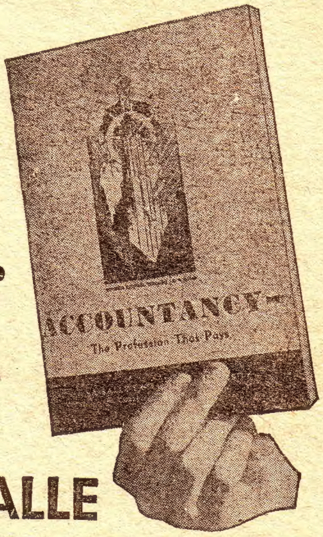

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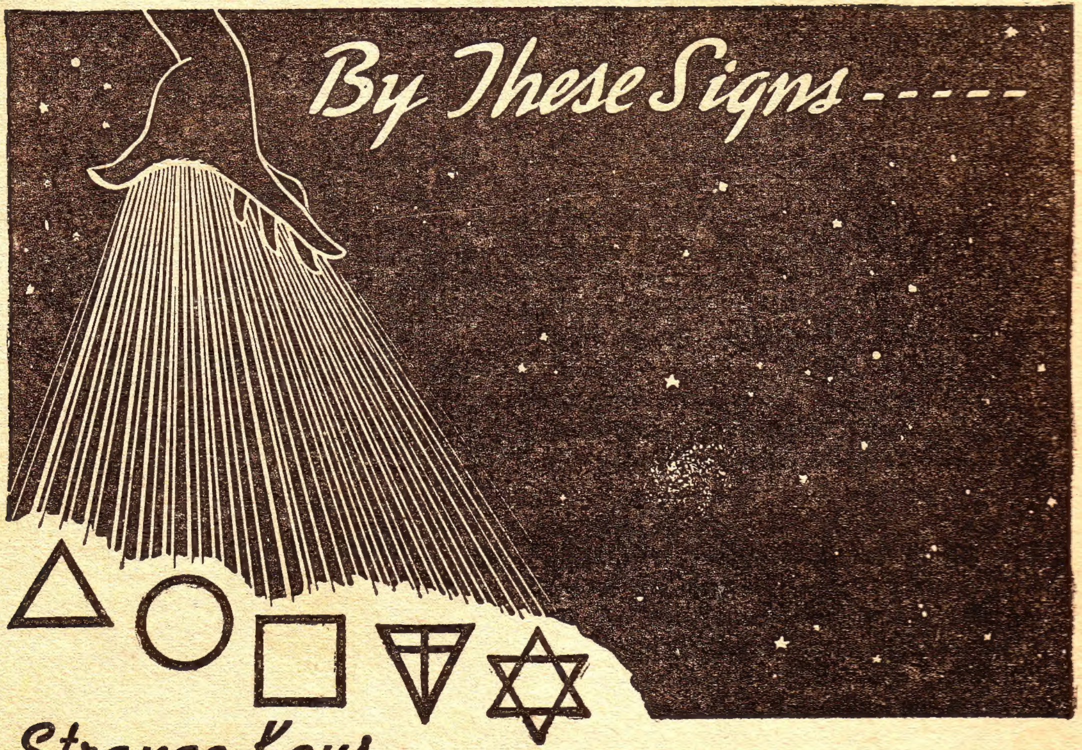

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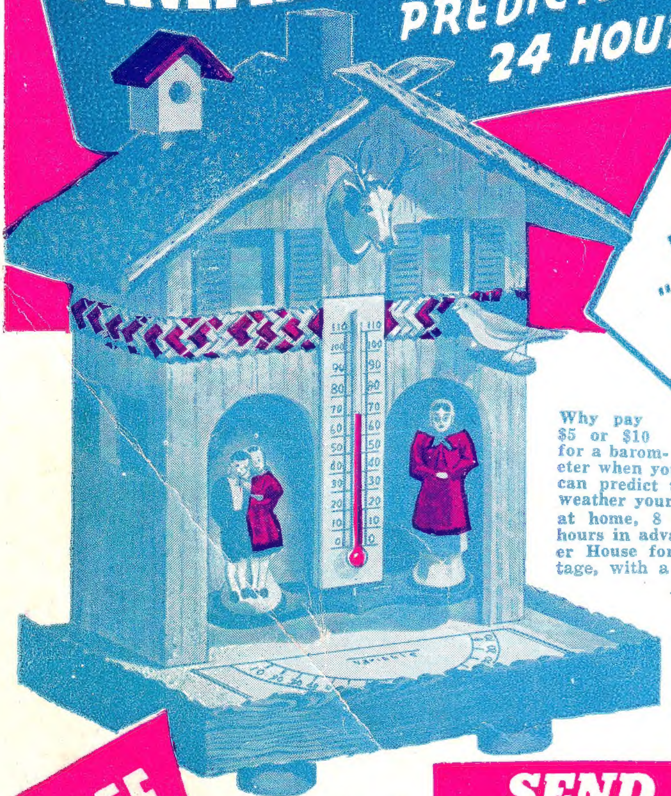

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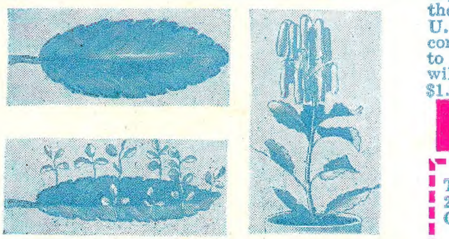

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